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THE TOWER OF TADDEO

BY

OUIDA, pseud.

AUTHOR OF 'UNDER TWO FLAGS,' ETC.

De la Ramée, Louise

IN THREE VOLUMES

VOL. III.

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THE TOWER OF TADDEO

CHAPTER XV.

'WILL you come to supper, madamigella? It grows late,' cried the rough voice of Veronica from the inner chamber, where their frugal table was spread.

She was a good-hearted woman, but in her manner she permitted herself to be rougher, ruder, more boisterous of late; she did not see why she should not add violence to her nature, why she should trouble herself to speak softly,

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and stir noiselessly, to please folks who had the sheriff's officer coming to their doors every day.

'Madamigella has always wanted as much observance as if she were a queen. Eh! much she will get of it now,' said the serving-woman, with her arms akimbo, and a frown and a laugh together on her face, to her devoted listener, the boy Poldo. She was angered that the evening meal was thus delayed, and her own work thus prolonged.

'Nobody lets you be proud if you are poor,' added Veronica, with accurate knowledge of human nature.

'The signorina is not proud, not a bit proud,' said Poldo; 'but she has a way with her which makes you feel small,

and when she looks at you she cows you, though she is kind.'

'Ay, ay, and won't they pay her off for all that now?' said Veronica, who was vexed and pained by the woes of her employers, yet found a certain relish in them. It fretted her to think that the whole quarter would see the hateful *Banda* swinging under the majolica angels and amorini; and yet it brought her importance and excitement to gossip about it all at the greengrocer's and the cheesemonger's, the butcher's and the tinman's, and to say with satisfaction: 'It does not matter to me—no, no—I have a fine nest-egg of my own in the savings bank, and I am torn in two with people who want me to go to them. I want nobody's bed or board; it would

be well for them if they could say as much, poor souls! but the master was always up in the clouds, and never saw the dirt which lay in his path, or the stones that he stumbled over. Leave? oh yes, I shall leave, of course; the saints befriend them, when I am gone! They will want help sorely.'

Between her humiliation at such disasters befalling a family which she served, and her importance at being the bearer of such dreadful news to the gossips of Santo Spirito and San Jacopo, she did not know whether she was the more glad or the more grieved, at the events which had cast such gloom over the peaceful life in the tower. The boy was wholly sorrowful. Nowhere would he find another mistress so thoughtful

for his creature comforts as Madama Beldia.

It was dull work, indeed, copying and yawning amongst those musty old volumes, where never a laugh was heard or a joke was made. But then, in compensation, what abundance of good wheaten bread, of sound red wine, of fritters, of pickles, of macaroni, of polenta, and of summer and winter fruits!

The Vestuccio children would henceforth devour those grapes and figs, those nuts and walnuts of Antella, which had been his summer and autumn joys; and he had heard the chandler say to the charcoal-seller: 'I shall give the tower folks no more of anything unless they pay ready money; they have not a penny

they say, so down on the nail they shall pay before a grain of rice or a stick of paste goes out to them.

And the heart of the lad had been heavy, as he had heard, because what he heard meant short commons and an empty stomach for himself. No one had ever understood, as Madama Beldia had done, that a growing boy's hunger is bottomless, and restless as the sounding sea. Poldo would willingly have struck down the chandler amongst his tubs of beans and seeds, his little round cheeses, his savoury brown sausages, his smoked tongues, and his flasks of olive oil. No credit to Madamigella Beldia, who had paid every Saturday morning her little weekly accounts at the shops as regularly and as surely as the strokes of the

old Dutch house clock tolled out the hours!

'It is a shame, a crying shame!' said Poldo, with red eyes and burning cheeks.

'It is the way of the world,' said Veronica. 'If you can drive a coach and six when you choose, everybody you meet on the road offers you a lift; everybody, from the Archbishop in his chariot to the dustman in his donkey-cart; but if you are a poor devil limping along the highway with a sore foot and a ragged jacket, why, then, nobody ever sees you on the path, neither his Grace nor the sweeper!'

'It is an infamous shame!' repeated the boy with fury.

Veronica was less touched to wrath:

she saw matters as the small traders saw them.

'They will send nothing, nothing, unless you pay for it; there are no weekly credits now,' she said to Beldia, with the sort of triumph which a coarse nature always feels in hurting the dignity of a delicate temper.

Beldia shrank as from the touch of a hot iron, but she soon recovered her self-command.

'It is very natural that they should feel afraid to trust us,' she answered. 'I will give you the ready money every morning.'

'For how long?' said Veronica. 'If you have got ready money, madamigella, you had best hide it upon your person when Gigi and Beppe come round next.

They poke into every hole and corner, nothing escapes them, and if they see any money they will take it.'

Beldia looked at her with the bewildered, harassed look of the tracked hare.

'They cannot deny us a little money for food,' she said stupidly. 'Even the galley-slaves are fed.'

'The galley-slaves? ay, ay!' said the woman roughly. 'But they have the wit to break the law and make the nation maintain them. Poor master has only made away with his own, you see; so he may go and starve, and it is nobody's business if he starve to death. If you have any money, hide it, or give it to me, and I will keep it about me.'

'I will hide nothing,' said Beldia

firmly; but her eyes did not lose their strained and hunted expression.

The woman's words had brought home to her with startling distinctness the fact that all her father possessed had been seized in the name of his creditors; and that nothing, not even the sheets they slept in, or the platter on which they cut their loaf, was their own any more.

'You have jewels and pretty things, madama,' said Veronica; 'they can't touch them, they are yours; you can pawn or sell them.'

Beldia was silent.

All her little personal treasures had gone, one by one, to satisfy the leech-like craving of her brother, and at the last the pearls had gone. She had

nothing left, except her body-linen and her wearing apparel.

Everything in the tower was her father's, and thus, now, belonged to his creditors.

'If the master had had a grain of sense,' said Veronica, 'knowing the plight he was in, he would have made a deed of gift of it all to you, or a deed of sale to Messer Odisio; and Messer Odisio would have stayed at home, and wedded you, and all would have gone well.'

'My father would never do a dishonourable thing,' said Beldia quickly, with a sigh. 'That would have been dishonourable.'

'Ah!' said the serving-woman, with brusque contempt. 'Fine words fry no

fish, and mend no holes. Is it honourable, think you, to write away his children's patrimony, and bring a maiden like you face to face with a vulgar shame and contumely like this, because he never had courage or strength to look his affairs in the face, and leave off buying mouldy parchments and mice-gnawed books. Honour—honour! 'tis a mighty big word; but it seems to me as how Ser Checchi, who is so rare and fond of it, has read its reading upside down!'

'Be silent!' said Beldia sternly. 'Cannot you respect my father's name? You have eaten his bread and known his goodness twenty years and more. Is it not infamy enough that his old age is betrayed and tormented by strangers,

without the foulness of his servants' tongues daring to soil his stainless name?'

'What I say is true, signorina,' said Veronica doggedly, yet abashed.

'Yes, it is quite true,' said the voice of Ser Checchi behind them.

Veronica screamed, and let fall the knife and the carrot which her hands held.

'I thought you were out of the house, sir,' she stammered, confused and terrified.

'I am no eavesdropper,' said Checchi, with a faint, sad smile. 'But you spoke so loudly, Veronica, that I heard you on the stairs. You are quite right; I have dishonoured myself and robbed my daughter. Believe me, you cannot

censure me as doth my conscience by day and night.'

He spoke gently and humbly, with the meekness of a chidden child, yet with the dignity of a discrowned king.

Veronica stood and stared at him in irresolute amaze; then, with a gasp, she threw her rough apron over her head, turned her shoulder to the wall, and sobbed aloud.

'I was a beast to say it,' she muttered between her sobs. 'And I never meant it—I never thought it, dear master!'

'I have told you that you were right,' said Ser Checchi. 'Yet I cannot let such things be said in my house, so long as I have a house at all. There is your wage for a month. Let this be the last night that you sleep here.'

And he laid down on the table beside her the amount of her wage; it was the last money that he possessed.

'No, no, master, no, no!' she cried, her voice choked by her sobs. 'I have an ill tongue, but I have not a base heart. I have eaten your bread in your prosperity; I will not leave you in your misery. I have laid by six hundred francs in your service; I will lend them to you, if you will take them. No, no, I will not go. Madamigella Beldia, speak for me! I will not go. I will not touch that money. He says that what I said was true. Then, why turn me from the door because I said it?'

Ser Checchi put the money into her unwilling hand.

'The truth is truth, by whomsoever

spoken,' he said briefly; 'but we love not those who chasten us. Go; and leave us to our fate. You are a strong woman and a capable servant; you will with ease find service elsewhere. We can keep none to serve us now.'

And he put the weeping woman gently but firmly out from the chamber, and closed the door upon her. Then his firmness deserted him, and his age and his sorrows overcame him.

He sank, broken and tremulous, upon the nearest seat.

'She was right,' he said hoarsely. 'I am dishonoured. My daughter—my dear daughter!—forgive me all I bring upon you!'

Beldia kissed his hands.

CHAPTER XVI.

Life in the tower of Taddeo had been hitherto always so peaceful, orderly, and regular, with an almost puritanic method in all its ways and habits, that the disorder of poverty, and the irregularity entailed by it, were the most cruel tortures and trials which could have befallen Beldia. Never in her life had she left a small or large payment over-due, a household bill neglected; their living had been simple, but generous and unstrained; she had never thought twice

before giving an alms or offering a meal, and the utmost exactitude had been observed in the discharge of all obligations which came before her in the daily routine of her management.

The difficulties, the embarrassments, the small, mean, trivial troubles which go with need of money, now harassed and embarrassed her at every step. She felt lowered by them and defiled by them. Every morning since she had been a child of fifteen she had set the house in order as soon as she had risen for the day; and, although her father had bade her avoid extravagance, she had always had plenty for the homely and comfortable needs of life, and had never been forced to deny herself the pleasure of getting a flask of superior wine for a

guest, a dish of fruit for the table, or a bunch of market flowers for herself. To be obliged to pause before she bought a few eggs or a little rice, to have to divide a few copper pieces anxiously between bread for to-day and bread for to-morrow, was a trial so new, so unimagined, that she felt herself the prey of some oppressive nightmare; sunk by it to the level of the beggars at the street corners, the poor beggars for whose improvidence her pity alone had prevented her disdain. All the heavy manual work also of the house fell upon herself alone. True, Veronica was not far off indeed, and was constantly offering her assistance, as did some of the neighbours out of curiosity rather than pity; but Beldia did not accept these offers, and all

the household work fell on herself. She had to sweep, to dust, to make the beds, to cook, to fetch water, to do everything which there was to do, and which the strong woman servant and the boy had done before for her; and the hard manual labours were almost a relief to the torturing mental anxiety which was upon her night and day. They fatigued her physically so intensely that, when she lay down at night, some hours of heavy sleep came to her.

'Oh, my love, that ever you should, through me, be brought to such degradation!' said her father once, as he saw her pass with a pan of charcoal, a coarse apron wound about her skirt, and her hair covered with a linen kerchief.

She smiled faintly.

'It is no degradation, father. The women of old Greece thought it none. Did not Penelope spin, and Nausicaia wash clothes?'

'You are a brave child, and merit a better fate than I have given you,' he said in a broken voice.

But even in his grief for her he did not realize how difficult it was to even obtain that pan of charcoal, and the frugal food which she cooked upon it. No one would give her credit even for so much as these, and her little personal trinkets and trifles, such as even so serious a maiden as she cherished, had all gone, one by one, in other years under Cirillo's draining exigencies.

One day when she saw him look more careworn, ill, more heartbroken than

ever, a sudden idea sprang up within her breast. She said nothing to her father, but wrapped a black shawl round her head and shoulders, and went out into the street. It was growing dark, and Vestuccio's shop would be closed, she knew; she took her way to his private house. The lamps were lighted, and their reflections were trembling in the river, which was full from a storm in the previous night.

There are few things in nature and art more beautiful than is the Arno, lighted thus, when above head there is a starry and moon-illumined sky. Even in the distraction and distress of her mind, she could not help looking westward and eastward at the scene, so long familiar, yet ever so fresh in beauty, the

darkness beneath the arches of the bridges and of the masses of building above them contrasted with the luminance of the heavens and the waters. Deep shadow veiled all which was poor, or base, or trivial; nothing was seen but what was majestic, mysterious, and noble. On such a night had Buondelmonte left the chamber of his love; on such a night had Ginevra wakened from the tomb; on such a night had Luisa Strozzi ridden down on her palfrey to the masked supper at Casa Nasi. Beldia looked at the loveliness of the river, and the tears rose in her eyes and choked her throat in thinking of the happy, harmless years which she had passed beside these fair, familiar scenes.

She ceased to look, and hurried on-

ward across the Ponte Vecchio between the closed shutters of the jewellers' and goldsmiths' little shops. The door stood open of the house in which Vestuccio occupied the first floor; a modest but commodious house in the Via dei Benci. She mounted the stairs with a sick heart, and rapped. Within she could hear voices and laughter. A good-looking wench opened the door to her, and said, with evident falsehood, that her master was away. There was a scent of tobacco, of garlic, of wine, of fried fish; and, being pressed hard, the servant girl admitted reluctantly that the master was at home, but had friends, and had bidden her deny him to all visitors. Then she showed Beldia into a close little room, with its window shut, and its petroleum lamp

flaring, and left her and sought her employer to interrupt his revels. The voices on the other side of the wall ceased, and the laughter also; and in a few moments Vestuccio appeared, a little red, as a man may be after a good supper, but smiling pleasantly and politely, and deprecating her apologies with a courteous gesture.

'Your servant, madamigella,' he said, lifting the smoking-cap which he wore. 'My wife is in the country with the little ones; God be with them, the darlings!—an old friend or two were supping with me to pass the time in their absence. Is your good father taken unwell that you come to me at this hour?'

Beldia threw off her black shawl and stood before him.

'Oh, for the pity of heaven do not play with me, Ser Aurelio!' she said passionately. 'You know of the great wretchedness in which my father is plunged. The truth was only made known to me the other day. They seized his books. He was obliged to tell me then what it meant, and all the woe which is upon him. You know how good he is, how simple, how guileless, and how, despite all his wisdom, he may easily be deceived and undone. I have come to you now because you are his chief creditor, it seems, and you have already taken Antella: can you not be content? Can you not spare him, give him time? He trusted you. He liked you. How could you betray his trust?'

Vestuccio listened in an attitude of respect and deference; but his eyes sparkled with anger, even whilst his countenance wore an expression of faint astonishment and of profound regret.

'Betray!' he repeated. 'Betray? I! Oh, signorina mia, could ever a word so base be said in seriousness to me? My honour is writ on granite, in sight of the whole town. I grieve for Ser Checchi's misfortunes; my heart bleeds for them; but I have been powerless to stop him on a road which never hath but one end.'

'To stop him!' echoed Beldia. 'You have driven him onward in it! It is you who hold all his paper.'

Her soul had acquired nothing of the cunning, and cuteness, and finesse which

are so needful in the commerce of the world. She felt that the man before her was the origin of all their woe, and she stripped his mask off and let him see that she knew him as he was.

It is a discovery which is never pardoned.

'I thought you were so attached to my father!' she cried in an ingenuous reproach which she repented of, as soon as she had yielded to it. Vestuccio joined his hands together impressively and looked up to the ceiling with pious invocation of the Most High who reads all hearts.

'I am truly devoted to your most saintly and noble father, signorina,' he said devoutly. 'But, when one's interests are in question, what would you expect?

One must sacrifice one's own brother to one's self!'

'I quite understand that *you* would do so!' said Beldia curtly and coldly, as she made a movement towards the door.

'Everyone would do so, signorina,' said Vestuccio, unabashed. 'Do not believe them if any say the contrary.'

For to Vestuccio it seemed so natural, so holy, so beautiful a thing to allow interest to rule existence, that he did not see that there was anything but what was most creditable in the avowal that it did so. To reproach an Italian with his love of his own interests is to speak to him in an unintelligible language. 'Who should love me if not myself?' he will say, with perfect good faith. 'We are entirely sure of no one except of our-

selves; therefore, in the name of all justice and prudence, let us first of all consider that best of all friends, our own advantage and advancement.'

Love thyself first: afterwards, a long way afterwards, love thy neighbour, if thou canst do so without hurt.

So ran the law to him.

'You are a hypocrite and a rogue then?' said Beldia with scorn and passion. 'If you be only a self-seeking usurer, why do you pretend to care for others?'

Vestuccio preserved his deferential attitude; he spread out his hands in a gesture of deprecation; his eyes alone, which looked downward, glittered with the anger which was in his soul.

'You mistake, madamigella,' he said humbly. 'You wholly mistake. I have

no power to arrest the course which the law takes. It is your venerable father, who has never comprehended that business is business, and that the closest friendship must give way to self-defence and to self-interest. I have done for him what I would not have done for my own father. I have given time and care, and thought and money, and if he had listened to me, things would not be now with him as they are. What would you? He has indulged the elegant tastes and costly whims of a scholar, whilst he was only a poor bookseller on the brink of bankruptcy. How could the end be other than it is? He has spent his days and nights in the useless illusory pursuit of a learning which is not worth the farthing match that a

child sells in the streets. In other times there were monasteries open for such vain dreamers as he. No one knows nowadays what to do with them; they are out of date, and the world walks over them while they remain distraught at their studies. It is many years now, Madama Beldia, since your father began to sign his name to bills and acts, without weighing well enough to what he put it. One thing or another has always dragged him down. There were his son's follies in one way, and his own in another; and he never could see an old book or manuscript but what his it must be; and he never noticed that it was all going out and nothing coming in, and he always liked to give you ready money to keep the house going, and he never

could bring himself to grudge a bit or sup to anyone, or deny anybody the pick of his own brains, and it has come to this at last—such things always do; and if the crash have been staved off so long, why, it is solely due to the efforts of your poor servant Vestuccio, whom you rashly and unkindly are inclined to blame.'

He spoke so frankly, so clearly, and so openly, that any stranger hearing him would have been ready to swear to his truth and integrity. Almost they made Beldia herself waver in her belief against him.

Every word he said so exactly portrayed her father's faults and foibles that it wrung her heart to hear him; she stood close to him, motionless, gazing at

him as if her eyes would fain plunge into his inmost soul.

He moved uneasily under that intense and prolonged gaze, and on the pretext that the lamp was flaring, he turned down the flame so that the room grew dusky.

Beldia drew a deep breath, as she replied to him :

'You speak plausibly, you speak with apparent candour; I cannot deny that my father's errors are such as you have said. But you have taken a cruel advantage of them. You have turned to your own profit his trustfulness and absence of guile. You have filled your strong box with his signatures, and when the time was ripe to most profit by them you have pulled the cord and let the axe

fall. You cannot deny it. You cannot deny it; all these men who bring these claims and charges and protested paper are your creatures.'

She paused, and looked to see him abashed, unmasked, ashamed. The innocent always expect to behold the guilty overwhelmed by the mere charge of guilt. She was wise, and clear of reason in many ways, but she knew not the heart of a rogue. She drew her pure, straight weapon of truth, and thought to see him shrink before it as Mephistopheles before the cross. But Mephistopheles, in the person of Vestuccio, was not so simple. He smiled within himself to see the maiden so frankly and so foolishly laying bare her soul to him, and showing him how

much, and yet how little, she knew, how dangerous and yet how impotent she was.

'Never show your cards, madamigella!' he murmured, and then, with a pained expression, added in a colder tone: 'Your language is strange and full of offence to me. But I can understand that you are agitated, and so are unjust and confused. These troubles have fallen on you without warning. Often and often would I have warned you myself, but your father would never allow me to do so, and he was master of his own secrets. Believe me, madamigella, believe me, by the souls of my children, whom you know that I love so well, if Ser Checchi has been thus far saved from utter ruin, it is due to me and

to the influence which my townsfolk are so good as to let me exercise in the counsels I give to them. I am a hard working man, who has risen from the lowest state, by energy and frugality, and the city knows it and honours me.'

Vestuccio's face beamed, his figure dilated; he had in his own eyes the nimbus about his head of successful and prosperous virtue. He was never so happy or so eloquent as when he lauded himself.

Beldia's gaze was riveted upon him, trying to read his hidden mind, and failing, because the candour and integrity of her own nature had no gauge by which to measure the duplicity and hypocrisy of his.

'If this be true,' she said simply, 'if you have had neither hand nor head in this cabal against my father, save him. He has always trusted you. You have always advised him. His ruin must be due to you, directly or indirectly, since you were so often his adviser. Save him.'

'And how, madonna mia?' cried Vestuccio, acting innocent ignorance and bewildered surprise.

'Get him time; get him loans; speak to those who seize his goods, who hold his signatures, if it be not you indeed who hold them. You are a man of business; you must know a thousand ways in business, by which men on the brink of ruin can be saved from the lowest depth of all. Save him, save him,

as I saved Gemma when the fungus of death was growing in her throat.'

She spoke with intense and fervid feeling, whilst her voice thrilled with the intensity of her dread and of her hope.

Vestuccio looked downward on the floor. For one brief second his heart was touched; he loved his child, and he remembered how this woman, who pleaded with him now, had remained in the contagion of the horrible disease, when Gemma's own mother had fled shrieking away from what was deemed a dying bed.

He remembered, and he knew that he could save her father without the outlay of a farthing, merely by renunciation of gain, merely by lifting up his hand to the

pack which he had let loose, and bidding them take their fangs off their quarry and wait.

For one moment he wavered, remembering and regretting. The next moment nature, habit, the instinct of avarice, the passion of acquisitiveness, the cruel, insatiable hunger of the usurer, which is like the appetite of the horse-leech, were all stronger than the alien and evanescent impulse of mercy.

He looked away from Beldia, and answered: 'You are labouring under some sad illusion, madamigella. I could not stay judgment against your father for a day. I have no power, no means. I am grieved, grieved to the heart, but I can do nothing. The law of debt must take its course.'

He had spent eight years in careful preparation for the catastrophe which had now fallen on Beldia and her father. Little by little he had built up the scaffolding, step by step he had drawn near the edifice; he could not now lay down unlit the slow match with which he had made ready to set it ablaze for the warming of his own hands and heart.

He loved his child, but he loved money, intrigues, and acquisition more. In the actual moment of her danger he would have renounced anything to save her; but years had gone by since then, his gratitude had cooled.

After all it was Providence which had saved her; so he thought to himself, and hardened his heart. It was not only gain

which he would lose if he yielded, but self-respect. He would for ever despise himself, and be despised by those who acted with him, if he now held back and spared the dwellers in the tower. It is not by mercy and long-suffering, by kindness or grateful memories, that the fortunes of industrious people like himself are made. A short memory for benefits and a long memory for figures are the two essentials to monetary success.

He looked upon the floor, his pleasant smile stereotyped upon his mouth.

'You have taken a wholly wrong view of the matter, *signorina mia gentilissima*,' he added respectfully. 'I might take exception at your expressions, but I pass them by; you are agitated and un-

happy, and know not what you say. I am powerless in this matter, which you seem erroneously to think that I control. It is not I who move the law, it is the men of law. I have no power to stop them in what they deem their duty. As I understand it, all which Ser Checchi suffers from are the legal and logical consequences of his own acts. If he had not signed these papers, these bills, these drafts; if he had not purchased costly works, and mortgaged all he possessed to pay for them, no one would molest him now. People complain of the law, but wrongly; the civil law never touches those who have not first violated some moral law written in their conscience, but broken in their acts.'

He paused to see the effect of his

words; he was pleased with the last phrase; it filled him with the calm complacency of a man who has been always careful to be himself on the right side of the law, ever to be creditor, and never to be debtor.

Beldia shuddered as she heard. From violence may come mercy, from fury may be born pity; but never, never, never, she knew, could any good or gentle thing arise from the accursed smoothness of a self-admiring hypocrisy, from the cruelty of a damnable avarice.

'Answer me one thing only, in one word,' she said, looking always at him with her straight, clear gaze, which he had now braced himself to meet. 'Is it not you who have seized Antella?'

'Madamigella,' said Vestuccio, with

dignity and rebuke, 'I had lent out my own honest gains upon that land. I had lost upon it; I had waited long, very long; if at the last I have entered into my own, I have done no more than that. Nay, so true a friend am I to your father, that to-morrow, if he pay me my capital and interest and costs, I will give the land back to him, as though there had been never any question of it between us. Can I say more? Who else would say as much? I have six children who look to me for bread. I cannot make gifts to right and left, as childless men may do.'

She looked at him in silence, reading his soul in all its meanness and baseness, and trickery and cruelty.

'My heart is but too tender,' he

continued, warming to his own self-praise as he ever did. 'It is a heart of gold. I maintain my old parents in every comfort, I have made the fortunes of my family; I rejoice to give; I am full of benevolence as the fresh melon of its juice; but there are limits—there are duties—one may be indulgent, but one must not be a dupe. Who will pay me for all the time which I have thrown away in your honoured father's affairs? No one, not a farthing; I am sacrified in every way. Others have the law on him, not I. The land? What is the land? All clay and rock, yielding nothing, and taxed at fifty per cent. It is a dead loss to me to be forced to take it instead of my good, sound, national notes. If all business were done as I

have done this thing, lenders would be beggars. Had I only had the money which I lent Ser Checchi, I could have turned and turned it over and over a score of times, and made hundreds, thousands, tens of thousands out of it. To help him, to succour him, I have robbed myself and my children, and the child unborn that my wife goes with now. And what do you give me in return? Abuse, suspicion, shameful and unjust reproach.'

His eyes filled, his hands spread themselves outward in the gesture of one wrongly accused, who repudiates a dishonouring charge; he stood erect and self-satisfied, a very model of calumniated, and upright, and self-respecting manhood.

He waited for her to reply, but she said nothing; her gaze was still fixed upon him. She was thinking bitterly how long a viper may dwell in the ivy by your gates, and you have no chance to see him shed his skin.

Vestuccio, being only thus answered by a silence which reproached and condemned him more overwhelmingly than any words could have done, replaced his smoking-cap on his head, set his eyeglass in his eye, and banished the kindliness and sadness from his face.

'Pardon me,' he said curtly; 'I can waste no more time. My friends in the next room are waiting for me. Offer my respects to your honoured father; it is useless to remind him that, had he attended to the disinterested counsels of

a practical man, he would not now be in the strait he is.'

Then he opened the door sharply.

'Lucinda, my girl,' he said to the servant maid, 'light the signorina Beldia down the stairs.'

CHAPTER XVII.

Beldia went home through the lamplit and moonlit streets, sick at heart with that weary sense of the futility of truth, of the nullity of justice, of the incapacity for right to struggle against wrong, which is the most enervating and torturing of sorrows. She knew, as plainly as though it were written on the walls, that all hope was over for her father and herself.

She realized with a horrible shock that their position was neither higher nor better than that of the many debtors

whose names were printed up at the doors of the Pretura, to be talked of all over the city. To her nature, so delicate, so proud, and so reserved, the discovery was a torture none the less acute because she endeavoured to bear it bravely. She knew that Vestuccio had adroitly schemed for and compassed her father's destruction, but she had no proofs that he had done so; no one would have heeded her protestations, and the law was on the side of the evil-doer. To the tribunals, as to the crowd, Vestuccio was but a prudent and provident man asking only for his own; and her father was the imprudent and improvident one, who is always a criminal in the sight of others, because he can no longer benefit or purchase his contem-

poraries. To the lender of money all were ready to doff their caps and bend their backs; the borrower of money was only a poor, played-out, uninteresting, useless creature in their sight. The world always respects power, and never asks the means and methods by which it has been gained.

In the streets and squares and shops and offices of the city, Vestuccio was a power: he had many men in his grip, and fortune in his future. Ser Checchi could not be of any further use or profit to anyone; naturally the town took the former to its bosom, and left the latter alone, like the dead ass by the wayside.

When she went up the stairs of her home, the door of the back room was open, her father stood in the doorway, a

brass lamp in his hand, waiting for her.

'You have been to ask grace of Vestuccio?' he said sternly.

Beldia did not reply; to pervaricate or deny never occurred to her.

'You did wrong,' said Ser Checchi. 'Long centuries ago, in yonder street, a woman asked the escaped lion to spare her babe; and the desert animal heard her prayer. But had she spoken to the usurer she would have spoken in vain. I did not think you would have so abased me.'

'It was not abasement,' she said, wounded by the word. 'I did but tell him the truth: that he had abused your trust, that he had taken Antella unjustly by abrupt foreclosing, that he was be-

hind all these other men who now attack you. I did but ask him time and patience, and such influence as it would cost him nothing to use. That was all.'

Ser Checchi smiled faintly.

'Poor innocent! Could you provoke him more? He will only go in the morning to the attorneys, and bid them hurry on their acts.'

'Why? Why should he hate you so? You have done him no evil.'

'I trusted him and he betrayed me. Who wrongs never pardons.'

CHAPTER XVIII.

Every half-year Beldia had, of late years, gone herself to pay the rent on the twentieth day of August, and on the twentieth day of February, as the Florentine law mercilessly exacts; and now, when these cruel documents came to their door, in these scorching days of the late summer, she thought with relief that the money for the coming half-year was safe in the hands of the old Canon of the Duomo, Don Gervasio, with whom it had always been her habit to

lodge it well in advance of the date at which it would be needed. This year her father had given it to her earlier than usual, foreseeing the troubles which were to come upon him, and desiring that this matter at least should be at rest. It was almost the last money which remained to him out of that small capital which he had inherited from his progenitors.

'You gave the rent money to Don Gervasio?' he asked her anxiously one day.

'Oh yes,' she answered; 'shall I get it from him, and pay Saetta beforehand?'

'It would be well,' said Ser Checchi. 'Better early than late.'

So she went that self-same day and

got the small sum from the old Canon, who kept it, with his funds for charitable purposes, in an iron box with a silver figure of an Apostle on its lid, and a secret to its lock.

The Canon was banker to all the poorer neighbours, and, when he kept the children's pence, produced them multiplied, and told their young owners that, if let alone, the *soldi* grew, just as endive did, or cresses.

When he gave her roll of notes to Beldia now out of his iron box, he looked anxiously in her face.

'If I could be of any use, you would tell me, my daughter?' he asked wistfully. 'I have heard with pain of your father's troubles. I owe him many years of good neighbourliness and peaceful communion

of the intellect. I would do anything in my power to lighten his burdens. You know that?'

'I know it well, most reverend,' said Beldia, with a deep sigh. 'But my father is very proud in some ways, although so humble in others. He would not take a loan.'

'And it would be wrong in me to question you as to that which he chooses to keep secret,' said the Canon. 'Nor would I do so. But when the men of law are knocking loudly at your gates, and you have not wherewithal to pay them and send them thence, there is no secret any more, alas! The very lads in the street know your sorrow.'

Beldia bent her head in ashamed

assent; her pale cheeks burned with crimson colour.

'I know not how this misery has come upon me,' she said sadly. 'My father was ever most punctual, most exact, most honourable.'

'He has fallen amongst thieves,' said Don Gervasio, 'and he has been too long mute under his wounds. But I cannot pardon him for his oblivion of his daughter's interests,' he added, a shade of severity and censure passing over his benignant features. 'Books are very dear to me myself, and good books and great books are the benison of the world; but not even to the wisdom of all the ages should your peace and prosperity and his own fair name have been sacrificed.'

'It does not matter for me,' said Beldia quickly. 'What matters is that the books will be lost, and his good name, as your reverence says, lost with them.'

Then she turned away to hide the agitation which she could ill control, and slipped the bank-notes within the bosom of her gown, and left the good priest to go down into the street and homeward. But on the threshold the Canon stopped her.

'Wait one moment. You go to pay the rent?'

'Yes, you know that I do,' said Beldia wonderingly, a vague fear fluttering at her heart.

'But I have heard,' murmured the Canon, 'that Maso Saetta means—wishes

—intends to—to—to send you a notice to quit.'

Beldia uttered a sharp cry.

'He cannot!' she cried aloud.

'Oh, pardon me, my child, he can.'

'He cannot!' she repeated wildly. 'He cannot, father! He cannot!'

'My poor girl, consider. You hold the tenements by no contract, no term of years; you have always held it loosely, as your forefathers did, with nothing written, paying from half-year to half-year. True, "*l'uso fa légge*," saith the proverb. But usage is against you here. Believe me, Saetta can turn you out in November, if he choose to give you dismissal now; and—and I have heard it said in the town that he will do so. I grieve to pain you more, my dear

daughter; but I would not have you go on a fool's errand to this graceless and unkind old man.'

'But he would never be so cruel as to take the very moment of our misfortune to make us homeless?'

'My dear maiden, adversity tests our friends; but few bear the test; and Saetta was never a friend of yours or anyone's. He is a greedy, hard, and ignorant person, who will only conclude from your father's present position that he is not a desirable tenant any more.'

'A tenant!'

She repeated the word stupidly. It seemed to her to have no fitness in connection with themselves; the tower was theirs; they had lived in it, loved it, cherished it, laboured for it; it had had

the mornings and the evenings of their days; it had harboured their joys and sorrows; it had seen their births and their deaths; it had heard the cry of the new-born child, it had seen the dead whom they loved borne across its threshold; it had heard the words of their prayers, the laughter of their lips, the sobs of their lamentations, the gladness of their delight, the deep-drawn breaths of their slumbers: they belonged to it, and it was theirs by the tender tie of a thousand days, by the sacred bond of a thousand nights.

It was theirs—theirs—theirs—by every bond which binds the heart of man to the roof which shelters him and to the walls which guard his sleep.

She was at home there, as were the

swallows under its eaves, and the owls in its loopholes and gargoyles. To dwell elsewhere than in the tower seemed incomprehensible to her; her father and grandfather had been born there before her, and her great-grandfather had watched the entry of Bonaparte's battalions from its grated casements.

She also had been born there, and cradled and reared there; and although she had always known, indeed, that the tower was not actually part of her father's possessions, but belonged to Tomaso Saetta, yet so used was she to her old home, and so long, she knew, had it been occupied by her family, that she felt rooted in the place like any tree in its native soil. She would have as soon expected to see the angels from its

niches take wing across the Arno, as have thought it possible that she could live elsewhere. Whenever she dreamed of her future with Odisio, it was always framed in this antique setting which she loved so well; whenever she thought of children who might be born to her, it was always of them as they would flit to and fro down these dusky stairs, which had felt her own feet so long, and as they would stand beside her at sunrise and at sunset amongst the flowers on this roof, whence she had so often watched the stars.

The Saetta family had become the proprietors of it, indeed, because the necessities of the old patrician race to which it belonged had thrown it on the market at a low price, and even that

low price had been too high for Ser Checchi to be able to purchase it, dearly as he would have loved to have done so. But although Saetta had become the legal owner of it, both she and her father had always felt that it did far more truly and entirely belong to themselves by all the ties which long affection and occupation can create between the dwelling and the dweller in it. They had taken Saetta every six months five hundred francs, for the half-year's rent paid in advance, and had received his receipt in return; but there his interest in it began and ended as far as they were concerned. He let its ground-floor to the charcoal-seller and the chandler, and the mezzanino to the cobbler and the tailor and the cabinet-maker, and the rest

to Ser Checchi, and never spent a penny on its repair, or attended to any fissure in its masonry or rot in its timber. The tower took care of itself, and having been built by the great master, Gaddi, could do very well and very long without any other care; and its wonderful majolica decorations of Messer Luca's bore wind and rain, sun and heat, and even that insidious enemy, frost, without any apparent dulling of their brilliant colours, or any blunting of their fine outlines.

Once a year Ser Checchi, from love of these angels and loves and shields and wreaths, paid a mason to climb and brush the dust and dirt off these lovely ornaments; but Maso Saetta would never have wasted a franc in doing anything of

the sort. His old father had bought the tower because it had come in his way to buy it very cheaply, but he himself despised it, thought it only fit for bats and rats, and much preferred a square little house with green shutters, a slate roof, and walls a few inches thick, which he had built for his use outside the San Gallo gate, and which stuck up its pert and paltry vulgarity amidst ruined vineyards and desolated gardens.

CHAPTER XIX.

She went down into the hot and shadeless ways of the city with a sense of confusion and stupor upon her, as if someone had struck her on the head. She did not go to the landlord, but wended her way straight homeward, intending to take counsel with her father. But even as she mounted the stairs and opened the door of the book-room, she met, face to face, the usher of the tribunal, who grinned as he passed her, and pointed his thumb over his

shoulder at Ser Checchi, who stood holding a printed document in his hand, and stared down on its lines as though they were written in some characters unknown to him.

'Not this! not this! not to us,' he said stupidly.

'May I see it?' she asked timidly, frightened by his distraught look; he let the paper pass from his hand to her.

She understood it at a glance. It was the *disdetta* with which the Canon had warned her that they were menaced, a notice to quit the tower within two months and twelve days' time. At the expiration of that term, unless the premises were vacated and surrendered to the owner, the law would turn the occupier, and all his good and chattels,

into the street by force, if they did not go willingly.

Beldia read it twice and thrice, unable to believe her own sight. She had often seen such documents brought to her poorer neighbours, carrying consternation and destitution in their train, for two months is but a brief space in which to pack up your tents and go to unknown ground.

'But we owe him nothing?' she said, meaning their landlord.

Ser Checchi shook his head.

'Nothing. You remember you took the last rent, last February, to him yourself. I suppose he is afraid for the one now coming due.'

'But when he has always been paid, can he send us away?'

'Oh yes! we have no contract with him. Our people have lived here two hundred years and more, but that does not count. He bought the tower; he can do as he likes with his own.'

He spoke wearily, drearily, stunned by this new calamity, feeling too helpless under it to rebel or protest. He was tired of his troubles; he was an old man, and they were too many for his strength.

He took the paper again into his hands and turned it to and fro stupidly, as though he were an illiterate man who could not read.

'I did not think that Maso would have done it to me, to me,' he said feebly and wonderingly.

He and Maso Saetto, the owner of the

tower, had been play-fellows and school-fellows in their youth, and cronies in their older years, often talking of their early days over a cup of coffee or a glass of lemonade.

'Oh, it is impossible, impossible!' said Beldia, her face scared and white. 'Go away?—you and I—oh, it is impossible! Go away! Leave the tower? Oh, no—no—no! anything but that, anything but that! He has always been paid; the law cannot let him do such a monstrous thing. The tower is ours, ours, ours!'

For the first time she had lost her reasonableness, her patience, her intelligence. She was stung to the heart. She was beside herself with pain. The tower had been her home from birth.

It had had all her life, all her care, all her love. She could not realize that a little old man, who had no love for it and no place in it, could have superior title over it to hers, and power to drive her and her father from the hallowed shelter of its roof.

Her father folded up the document, and placed it with the other law-papers in a drawer.

'He can do as he likes with his own,' he said in the same low, broken, tired voice. 'All these acts have frightened him. Proprietors love not debtors under their roof-tree.'

'But we owe him nothing!'

'That makes no difference. He is afraid that we shall. When a hound is lamed and falls, the rest of the pack turn

on him and rend him. It is the law of life.'

'And you will do nothing?'

'There is nothing to do.'

He knew that there was nothing to do; against a *disdetta*, signified by the tribunal in the landlord's name, no man can appeal. It is a decree immutable and unalterable; if the tenant has not vacated the house on the date appointed, the law casts him and all he possesses into the street. He cannot complain; he was duly cited and warned.

She felt as though the world itself was slipping from beneath her feet, and the solid earth giving way and vanishing into space.

'But I have the money to pay him,' said Beldia piteously. 'Surely, surely

he would not turn us out if he saw the money ?'

Ser Checchi lifted his dulled, sad eyes and sighed.

'The sight of money sometimes works miracles,' he said hesitatingly. He had seen it act like an incantation on his countrymen, making the savage meek, the timid bold, the unkind full of loving kindness; he had seen truth forsworn, peace signed away for ever, certainty thrown aside for possibility, and solid value bartered for shining dross, at the mere magical sight of money in the palm.

'But no, no,' he added imperatively; 'since he has done us this outrage, let it so remain. Seek no redress. He does but exercise his legal right. I would

not humble myself or you to plead for any respite.'

'But there may be some error? He may think we cannot pay. What can he want more than to have his money's worth? Oh, let me see him, father, let me see him!' she cried, with unwonted passion, losing her power of self-control and self-effacement. 'If we are here we will be happy even with bare walls. Things will mend. Trade will return. We spend so little that we shall be able to live. But it must be *here*, oh, it must be here! If I go hence, I shall leave my heart in the very stones!'

She trembled violently, her pale face was violently flushed; being a true woman as she was, the calamity which struck at her associations and affections

affected her far more intensely than the privations and miseries which touched her material welfare. To die of hunger in her old beloved home seemed to be a sweeter and fairer fate than to dwell in riches and abundance elsewhere.

Her father looked at her for a moment, and then averted his eyes, unable to endure the sight of her anguish.

'Do what you will,' he said to her; 'I, who have brought you to this pass, have lost all title to dictate to you. You may easily be wiser than I. More unwise you cannot be.'

CHAPTER XX.

On that vague permission she acted. She took the money for the rent from the old priest, to whom she had confided it, and went to the dwelling of Maso Saetta.

He was an old man, who lived on his own small means, frugally, had never married, and led the monotonous, trivial, tedious life led by so many of his country people, toddling between his chamber and his coffee-house, amusing his forenoon at his barber's, and in the

evenings going to one of the cheap theatres or the puppet show, or sitting on the bench by Goldoni's statue to see the fine folks drive down the Lung Arno.

She had always seen Maso Saetto as easily as she saw the communal clock, whenever she wanted to do so. But now again, and again, and again, he eluded her; was neither at his own house or at his usual haunts, and seemed to have altogether altered the routine of his days. She began to divine that he avoided her on purpose, and redoubled her efforts, going again and again in the same day to the street where he dwelt. Time was passing, months are but as an instant when they are bringing what we dread upon their wings; and a ghastly,

choking terror seized her, when she thought that, if she could not turn or soften him, the tower would soon be no more theirs. She awoke from a short and troubled sleep every morning with this dread suffocating her; her once peaceful nights were broken, her once happy waking was over; when she heard the bells chiming in the clear dusk of the dawn, she no more rose gladly because another day had begun. She rose in apprehension, and with oppression, dreading what the coming hours should bring.

Her father never asked her if she had seen Maso. He knew well that she had not, or she would have told him.

'Aren't you thinking of getting a new roof to cover you?' said Dessi, the

bailiff, officiously to her. 'Time flies, and you won't be wise if you provoke *the sfratta*.'

The sfratta is the corollary and colophon, as it were, of the *disdetta*, the last act of all which tells the refractory tenant that the carabineers are coming to drive him out into the street, and pitch his goods out after him.

Beldia did not answer; she ignored Dessi as utterly as it was possible to do. 'The proud-stomached wench!' he thought angrily. 'How dare she hold her head in the air like that, when I have locked up her very jam-pots and bed-linen, and have even got her saucepans and fish-kettle in my keeping?'

'Out you'll go, mind that,' he said spitefully one day. 'You won't turn

Maso more than you'll melt the bronze boar. Not a bit of it. Don't you hope to do it. Vestuccio has got hold of Maso.'

Beldia sighed heavily, but she had self-command enough to ask him nothing. She knew that it was most probable that what he said was true; the influence of Vestuccio spread far and wide.

She only doubled and trebled her efforts to see the landlord; the time it took up to do so she could ill spare, for all the household work was now hers to do, and such food as she could obtain she had to prepare; and she strove to make it as tempting and delicate as she could to attract her father's failing appetite. At length, all other means proving

useless, she resolved to wait at the barber's shop, where, from the time that he had reached puberty, Saetta had never neglected to go as the city clocks tolled noon; and there at last, although his hour was changed to escape her, she saw him come, looking furtively from side to side as he hurried across the threshold.

She hurried after him, and caught the lappets of his long coat.

'Ser Maso, Ser Maso, hear me; for pity's sake stop and hear me!'

He looked down on her in terror; he was a little, red-faced, plump, merry-looking-man; but he lost his colour and frowned as he said nervously, trying to pluck his coat from her grasp:

'I cannot listen—I cannot indeed.

You must go to the lawyers if you want anything. Everything is in the lawyers' hands. Let me go. Pray let me go.'

'But I have brought the money for the half-year to come,' said Beldia, taking the bank-notes from the bosom of her gown. 'You cannot send us away if we are ready and willing to pay. Our people have been there two hundred years, and you are my father's friend; perhaps you feared we could not pay, and so you did this cruel thing; but here is the money for the half-year to come.'

The eyes of Maso Saetta twinkled, winked, and leered as they saw the crisp bank-notes so near his grasp; he longed to snatch them, he ogled them

as any satyr a nymph; he made a little clawing, grasping, unconscious movement of his hands, which is a frequent gesture with Italians when they behold money. But he turned his head away resolutely, and shut his eyes tightly to shut out the temptation.

'It is not that,' he said quickly. 'Oh, not at all, not at all! It is quite another matter. I want the tower empty; I have other uses for it. I have other tenants. Very likely I may sell it. Very likely the municipality will pull it down——'

'Pull it down?'

'Eh!' said the owner, with a deprecating outward curl of his lips. 'It is very old; it is dirty and grim and ugly; it takes up room, and they want every-

thing smart and wide, and clear and white-washed. All the water-side of the Borgo San Jacopo is marked for demolition, and if they pull down the tower I shall have large compensation, and the della Robbia will sell alone for a vast deal.'

'Pull down the tower!'

She echoed the words faintly, leaning against the doorpost of the barber's shop to keep herself from falling.

'*E antico!*' repeated Maso Saetta, with that boundless scorn which the Italian can put into those two words.

'It is old!' he repeated, chuckling in cynical derision of its age, and then, seeing her pained, scared face, her appealing eyes, the bank-notes in her hand, he grew angry at the unreason and untime-

liness of this absurd appeal to him, which tempted him and worried him, and made him feel ashamed of using his own unquestionable rights.

'My good maiden,' he said breathlessly, thrusting his face close to hers, and waving his shaking fingers in the air, 'this is unreasonable, this is unkind, this is preposterous! You should have more consideration. When a man employs a lawyer, he does so because he wishes to be put to no trouble in the matter himself. I respect your father, and I pity him, and no one can understand how he has lost his wits, and come to such a pass as he has. But one must think of one's own interests before all. You cannot expect me to forget my own interests. I have acted on

good advice, and I shall not draw back from what I have done. You should not try to unnerve me in this manner. It is unkind. Besides, how could you and your father keep up a place like that, when your books are all sold, and your trade at an end? Be reasonable, my dear. Be reasonable. It is not honest what you want to do: to live on at my expense and cheat the piper of his pay. Oh-h-h! Do not set your back up like that. When folks cannot pay they must go softly and meekly; they walk on broken bottles. Yes, yes; I see the money; but I suppose it belongs to the creditors. If Gigi Fanno saw it, he would take it and lock it up. I shall not say anything about it, but you had best hide it in your gown. Yes,

yes; I know all you want to say. I have been a friend of Ser Checchi's: I never said I have not, but friendship is one thing, and interest is another. One must consider one's own interest before all. I want the tower emptied; I want the tower vacant. You have had your notice to quit. It is quite regular, quite legal. What have you to complain of? Am I, or am I not, the owner of the place? Ay, you cannot dispute that. Then go back to your father, and tell him so, and tell him that, when one employs a lawyer, one does not expect to be worried out of one's life by women. No—no—no! I have said it and I stick to it. You have the notice to quit. Out you go! out you go! Of course a week more or less we will not

make a fuss about, for old acquaintance' sake. But out you go. I have other views for the tower. And you, hearken to a word of sense—go you and take a couple of little rooms. It is as much as you can afford, and maybe you won't be long able to pay for even those; and, I am told, everything except your beds is seized. The idea—the idea of poor folks without a table or chair wanting to go staying on at the tower! Two hundred years? I know you say so. Yes, I believe it is so. But your people were only tenants all that while. My father—rest his soul!—bought it forty years ago, and the deed of sale was registered, and may be seen by whoever will. I am the master—I am the master! and out you go. No—no;

no — no! It is of no use to torment me; you ought to have more feeling, you ought to have more consideration. You will cause me an apoplexy; I must go home unshaven, and take a purging dose. You should not excite one so. I feel a booming in my ears. If I perish of a stroke, you will have killed me.'

And he began to cry, for he was exceeding frightened.

'It is a shame, signorina, to torment a poor, good, kind man thus,' said the barber, who had been listening all the while, a brass pot of hot water swinging in his hand. 'It is a shame to importune him so, and it may cause him a stroke, as he says. Like enough, alack! Ser Maso has a heart of gold, and it irks him to deny the smallest thing to

man or child. Come into my inner room, sir,' he added, 'and lie down on my sofa a bit, and let me make you a cooling draught. If you walk home in the agitation you are in now, you may very well not reach your house in safety.'

'You are right,' said Maso Saetta, with a kind of pride in being so near his end, mingled with a great commiseration for himself. 'My feelings are always too much for me, and to be obliged to seem unkind to an old friend is very painful. But when one has had good advice, and has set the law in motion, no reasonable being would be turned aside from his own interests.'

Here his tottering steps bore him across the threshold of the inner room

of the barber, and the door of it was closed on him, and Beldia was left alone in the shop with some curious passers-by, and some round-eyed street urchins crowding round the door to see what was the matter.

'What can that maiden be thinking of? She and her old fool of a father must be mad,' said the barber in the inner chamber, as he mixed a lemon-juice and citrate of magnesia; 'they have nothing in the world; they are cleaned out like disembowelled rabbits, and they expect to stay on in such a fine place as Taddeo's tower. They are a disgrace to the town. You do well, sir, to get rid of them. The man has always been a poor, dreamy, feckless creature, looking for noon at twilight and thinking

twelve is thirteen; and as for the signorina, Madonna Beldia as they call her, why, there is naught to say against her virtue, but she is a wench who thinks herself a queen, and nobody good enough to speak to; my woman once takes her a piece of harmless gossip, as women will, and she reads her a sermon on back-biting and bearing false witness! She is like a starched coif, and I for one shall not be sorry to see her roughly handled and the starch creased. Drink this, dear and good sir, and lie quiet a little; she cannot come in hither.'

'She is a good young woman enough, but headstrong,' said Maso Saetta faintly. 'She does not realize her own situation. If Gigi Fanno knew she had that money in her breast, I misdoubt the

law would not let her finger it. Debtors cannot secrete large sums.'

'Nay, it is a fraud,' said the barber. 'How is your head now, sir? If you would like a leech or two I could run over to the apothecary's opposite.'

'No, no, the ill is passing. Are you sure she cannot come in here?'

'Sure and certain, sir. The bolt is shot.'

'It would be only right that the creditors should know she has that money. Really and truly it is theirs.'

'It is theirs, sir, yes. If I said a word to Gigi? I shave him twice a week.'

'It might be well; the law must never be defrauded. Yes; I think it would be well.'

'Then I will say the word, sir, before

the day is over,' said the barber with virtuous unction, and that mysterious pleasure in doing harm to people with whom he had no concern, which is frequent in human nature.

CHAPTER XXI.

Ser Checchi had courage and integrity in his blood, and at first, for the sake of his daughter and of his own good name, he struggled against his adversity. But he could not bring himself to stoop very low, or to beg very humbly; words of supplication choked him. Though a man of great intellectual humility, he had been always proud and sensitive, having accorded many favours but asked none; so that he petitioned ill, and did not understand the trick of greasing the

palms of those middlemen who are always supreme in such circumstances; moreover, the covert influence of Querci and of Vestuccio was always opposed to him, closing any doors he strove to open, and hastening on what he tried to retard, so that he could do little, very little; and the time grew close at hand for the actual sales to take place. The neighbours had a sore sense of deception, when they still involuntarily felt unwilling respect for that slight, bent, feeble figure, with its soft gray hair touching the shoulders, and the luminous large eyes looking so far beyond them and theirs, as Ser Checchi went on his weary way through the streets to beg mercy and delay from his torturers.

The very reverence which he had inspired among those who saw him in his daily walks in the city went against him now, for to the vulgar it is always irritating to have been subdued into feeling respect where there is no money to warrant their feeling it, or to reward them for having done so.

'What an artful old hypocrite to look so venerable, and buy choice copies as if he were some rich scholar, whilst all the while he was head over ears in debt!' said the tradesfolk of the neighbourhood; and this, or something like this, was the general sentiment amongst the small number of persons who were interested in observing the decline and fall of his fortunes.

Once in her despair, feeling that no

personal reluctance or pride should prevent her essaying any means which could possibly alleviate her father's distress, Beldia went to the offices of Pampilio Querci, situated in the Canto dei Nelli. His name was attached to the suit of more than one creditor, and she knew that, although not officially, he was virtually the adviser of Vestuccio. The attorney, a little, dapper, spruce, pert figure, bald at twenty-six years old, and pallid as a candle, received her with elaborate and frigid politeness, sitting behind a writing-table strewn with legal papers, and the manuscripts of the archæological articles which he was preparing for a learned Roman review.

He listened to her politely, but evidently wearied as by a twice-told

tale. He was grieved, he was inconsolable, he was in despair, but he could not defer execution: he was but the instrument of his clients; was Dessi insolent and overbearing? — he was pained to hear it, but he could do nothing; custodians were independent citizens, under no one's orders; they had heavy responsibilities, they could scarcely be blamed if they were anxious to protect themselves; in the event—an absurd hypothesis, she would excuse him for even putting it forward—in the utterly impossible event of anything seized in the name of the law being made away with by the debtor, or anyone belonging to him, Giuseppe Dessi was responsible for its disappearance.

He might, therefore, be excused, if

he were over-solicitous and somewhat impertinent; nevertheless, if she thought she had any real ground of complaint, she might address a petition against him to the most worshipful the Pretore of the tribunal of the section; he could not guarantee that such an application would meet with success, but it might do so, if respectfully and humbly worded.

All this he said in long, involved, pompous and deliberate phrases, balancing a paper-knife on his forefinger, and looking at her impertinently through his eyeglasses, as he leaned back in his office chair.

He had been as amorously moved towards her at one time as a cold-blooded and cautious little egotist can

ever be so moved to anyone; and it consoled his wounded vanity and his balked passion to see this serene and stately maiden a supplicant before him, and to be able in turn to reject her suit.

Had she not deserved every humiliation and tribulation which could befall her? What vengeance of 'the handless and footless goddess' could be too great upon a woman so blind and so ingrate?

'It is well that my fancy was restrained from fulfilment,' he reflected. 'She grows plain, quite plain, and she looks old.'

He did not say in so many words, 'If you had listened to my suit, all these miseries would have been spared to you;'

but his attitude, his smile, his bland reproof, his frigid condolence, all said it for him in unmistakable meaning.

She might have possessed him, and his dapper person, and his checked suit, and his bran-new house amidst the tramway lines and the jute factories, and she had preferred a wandering Lombard scholar, with loose chestnut curls and an old velvet jacket, and no house at all anywhere, except in outlines upon his drawing-board.

Beldia was mute under the malignant ingenuity which made her parent's misfortunes seem traceable to her. It was possible enough, she knew, that had she accepted the young advocate's suit, the affairs of Ser Checchi would never have drifted to so desperate a ruin.

'If it be your vengeance, it is a poor, and paltry, and cruel one,' she said at length. 'My father had no part or act in my rejection of your hand. He showed you hospitality, kindness, liberality; and in return you steal his thoughts, and hawk them to the public press, and hound on his enemies against him. It is you who have counselled Maso Saetta to drive us from the tower.'

'That is wholly untrue, signorina; you are cruelly unjust. As a man I feel, and feel poignantly; but of my feelings you were pleased once to make no account; as a lawyer I am a mere machine, I can listen to no entreaties, I can neither pause nor waver in my course. My duty, my sole duty, is

towards my clients, and, whatever it may cost me, I must do their bidding, and follow what I conceive to be their interests.'

'You need not have accepted their affairs,' said Beldia, weary of the long, pompous, and empty periods. 'You owe my father much, signore; you have learned much from him, and your learning has brought you other wages than those of that pure intellectual delight which it has always been sufficient for him to feel.'

She glanced as she spoke at the manuscript ready for press, and at the printer's proof which lay beneath his hand upon the table, between the summons-papers. Over Querci's pallid face there passed a quiver of embarrass-

ment. Though his hand had written, and his name had signed, these scholarly articles, he knew well enough that it was of her father's scholarship, and her father's suggestions and discoveries, that those papers were full; though from their initial letter to their colophon no allusion was made, no reference was hinted, as to the man who had in reality inspired them.

'I have sat at the feet of Ser Checchi in certain studies with pleasure and profit,' he said, with some faint confusion disturbing for a moment the starch of his stiff and self-satisfied manners. 'I would never deny it for a moment. But it is not my fault if he has been so engrossed in those studies that practical matters have been lost

sight of by him. I cannot afford to imitate his error, precious although such learned pursuits and investigations are to me. If he has not had at his side a practical adviser, who would have saved him from the consequences of such absence of mind, it is not my fault either. If you had chosen, I would have united my interests to his. But you preferred that it should be otherwise. It is the greatest pain to me that I have been compelled by my professional obligations to assume an attitude offensive, and apparently hostile, to you. But I am, of a truth, no more responsible for it than is this paper-cutter for the opinions of the volume upon which it is employed. Had they not come to me, these adversaries of

yours, they would have gone to some other solicitor, who would probably have shown less delicacy and patience in a painful duty than I have done.'

Then she turned away from him as she had done from Vestuccio, and went out of the office. Querci rose and hastened after her to open the outer door.

'Signorina,' he murmured, 'when I can befriend you conscientiously, believe me that I shall ever rejoice to do so. I am not Signore Saetta's keeper, nor Ser Checchi's, nor was I ever, allow me to remind you, attorney for the latter. Messer Tomaso has, on the contrary, always honoured me with his confidence. I owe a duty to my clients

which I must fulfil, and he is one of them. But if you can obtain from him, or from them all, or from any one of them, an order to suspend proceedings, I shall be relieved and glad.'

He extended his hand as he spoke; she did not take it.

She had seen his clients again and again before this day, and one and all they had replied to her that they could move in no way, that the advocate Querci held their affairs in his hands, and that they dared not meddle with him. Her life swung like a pendulum between the thresholds of creditors' houses and of lawyers' studies; she was worn out by the ceaseless and useless swing to and fro betwixt these men, who sent her backwards and forwards

from one to another as the players at pallone sent their ball.

Querci closed the door upon her, and returned to his desk.

'Plain—yes, she grows plain,' he thought once more with unction. 'And she must be four-and-twenty years old by now. When the old man is dead, she will have to go out to domestic service in some capacity; she has nothing, and her Lombard will be wise enough to keep the ocean between them. To think that I ever wished to marry her! and that I might have been taken at my word!'

Then he lit a cigarette, and felt that fortune had protected him, and dreamed of himself as he would be in future years—town councillor, provincial coun-

cillor, deputy, secretary of finance, commander of civil orders, even—who could say not?—even cousin of the King by virtue of the Annunciation Insignia. Why not? A Sicilian notary is so now.

The bean-stalk climbing of a Messer Crispi makes ambitions ferment, like new wine, in the brains and bosoms of all youthful lawyers.

Then he roused himself from his dreams, took up his pen, and resumed his essay, looking every three minutes at the memoranda which he had taken down a year or two before from the teachings of Ser Checchi, concerning the African origin of the Sardinian race, and the epoch of the Etruscan invasion of Latium.

Half an hour after there was a tap at his door, and a man entered.

'Good-day, Messer Vico,' said Querci, with cheerful politeness, slipping his manuscript into his blotting paper. 'I am at your service; what is it?'

Ludovico del Beni, a tall, bony, brown man, with a weak mouth and kindly eyes, wiped his forehead, spat on the floor, twirled his hat in his fingers, and then said sheepishly:

'Please, sir advocate, I do not like this business.'

Querci looked at him sharply.

'Why not?' he inquired.

Ludovico del Beni, called Vico by all who knew him, who kept a small shop of mattings, and cordage, and brush-work, stood first on one foot and then

on another, and spat again on the floor with great ceremony and solemnity.

'Well, sir,' he said, with a pause, 'he is an old man, and a gentle one; and my mind misgives me that he has not got long to live, and it seems to me that I'm neither here nor there in this business, and I'd like to be out of it; and why don't Ser Aurelio do his own jobs, and put his name to them? And the young woman, she came to me last evening, and she is very pretty spoken, and she is fond of the old man, and so I wanted to say, sir—can't they be given time and let off a bit? It is not a business as I like; no, I never was a hard man, and I don't care to look like one; and I said to the young woman, if the sales could be stopped, and if

the matter could be arranged in any other way——'

'It cannot,' said Querci, with a sharp click of his teeth, like the shutting of a steel trap. 'Confine yourself to your own affairs, my friend; they are like enough to cause you trouble.'

The tradesman looked at him nervously, and, with a meek and deferential pleading in his voice, said timidly:

'The prosecution is in my name, is it not?'

'Of course. It is you who hold the bill.'

'To please Ser Aurelio. I have never had a penny of the money.'

'That is not the present question. You are the actual and apparent holder

of the bill. You obtain judgment and levy execution. A sale follows, as night follows day.'

'But I do not like to look like a knave.'

'A knave!'

Querci was shocked; nothing alarms men of his kind so much as plain language.

'There is no question of knavery,' he said coldly. 'If there be any knavery at all, it is on the part of the debtor, who made himself responsible for sums which he knew he could not meet. I would advise you not to talk in this way; you yourself have paper out which is not worth very much. It may prove necessary to see how much, if your compassion for the old man in

the tower runs away with your common-sense.'

The tradesman trembled as he heard, and took out his large cotton handkerchief, and wiped the perspiration from his forehead.

'But, sir,' he said piteously, 'we ought all to be merciful, and not judge our neighbours; and it is quite true what she says, that Ser Checchi has always been a most quiet, harmless, honest citizen, and if his craze for books ran away with him, and he had a bad son to drain him dry, why, so may anybody; and my own lads cause me trouble enough, and I have a fellow-feeling.'

'Your reflections come late in the day, my friend,' said Querci with cutting

contempt. 'The notice of sale will be out on Friday.'

'In my name?'

'In your name, and in the names of others. It is impossible, you see, for Ser Aurelio to wait any longer. There is too much danger in delay. Other creditors may arise, and the chance of enforcing full payment will be lost. Besides, the orders are given.'

The man stood silent, regretful, and disturbed.

'But I have nothing to do with it,' he said timidly. 'I am put forward as if I had, but you know well, sir advocate, none better, that I have no more to do with it than the babe unborn.'

Querci frowned; the imbecility and

obstinacy of the man incensed his higher intelligence.

'Why talk this nonsense at the eleventh hour?' he said with severity. 'If you speak in such a way to anyone besides myself, you will have unpleasant communications from Vestuccio yourself. Remember all that you owe to his forbearance and to his good nature.'

The unhappy tradesman drooped his head and shifted nervously from one foot to another, and seemed to shrink into himself as a young shy dog will do when he sees a whip.'

'Very well, sir,' he said humbly. 'If it must be, it must be. But I am sorry for that maiden and the old man!'

He was one of the many humble tradesfolk who were of so much use to

Vestuccio in his financial transactions, people necessitous and easily moulded, who, having been assisted by him in the beginning of his intimacy with them, became in due course his creatures, his instruments, his marionettes, moved by him either through their terror or their cupidity. He would not for worlds have figured in law courts himself as a persecuting and usurious creditor, but it was in no way against his reputation to pass on the bills which he received to his puppets, and guide unseen their manœuvres in the tribunals, and secretly impose on them an inexorable severity, whilst openly and publicly he lamented their rigour.

When a bill has passed out of your hands, what can you do about it?

Nothing, clearly, were you king or emperor. Whoever holds it is the headsman who strikes when he chooses. You may express your grief that it has gone out of your hands; but, once put in circulation, you can no more stop it than you can stop the rolling and exploding of a cask of petroleum, if you have set it alight and started it down a slope.

No one ever saw the match in Vestuccio's hand; people only saw him running with a bag of sand to put out the flaring barrel, and always arriving too late, and expressing his regrets with touching pathos for the carelessness with which others left inflammable oils within reach of ignited fuses.

True, there were a few who were not

dupes of his comedy; there were even many who knew the whole truth, but such persons respected him the more for his dexterity and duplicity. The public is not angry with a good citizen who purrs pretty phrases in its ear, whilst he leads it by the nose wherever he pleases.

'If he had trusted all his affairs to me,' he said often at this juncture, with tears in his eyes, 'Ser Checchi would not now be in the position he is. I was grieved to foreclose on Antella, it cut me to the heart to do anything harsh; but when there are also many creditors, one dares not lag behind, one's duty to one's family is paramount.'

This was the kind of speech which enchanted and enslaved his fellow-townsmen. Disguise is usually popular.

It expresses deference for your neighbour's opinion. If you did not care for his opinion, you would not dissemble to propitiate him. Human nature forgives anything except bluntness. Bluntness offends; it is the brother of truth. Vestuccio was never blunt, and he was always popular.

Ser Checchi ceased to struggle, desisted from all effort. He accepted his fate, and bent his head to the storm meekly, ashamed, bitterly ashamed, of the folly which had drawn it on his head.

He ate scarcely anything, slept but rarely and fitfully, and his hands had a continual tremor in them; he wrote illegibly, and grasped his pen with difficulty.

'Why was not my hand paralyzed ere I put my signature to any bill?' he said bitterly to his daughter. 'Everything comes too late, even infirmity!'

When she heard him say this, she burst into a passion of weeping.

'It is not paralysis, father,' she cried piteously; 'no, no—no, no.'

'It will be,' said Ser Checchi quietly.

He did not deceive himself; he knew that his strength was failing, his health giving way.

'Only let my body die before my brain!' he said in his heart, in the scholar's terror of aphasia.

One day a registered letter was brought to Beldia; her heart leaped up in sudden hope, thinking that it bore news of her betrothed; but before her

eager hands could take the packet her face fell—she recognised the handwriting of Cirillo.

She opened the letter with fear; nothing but trouble had ever come to them from him.

Out of the envelope dropped a bank-note. There were a few hurriedly written lines with it :

'I won fifty thousand francs last night. I send you twenty of them. Your pearls enabled me to play. I am well, and hope that what I send may get my father out of trouble. You see the devil is not as black as your maiden fancy paints him. Acknowledge this, Poste Restante, Monaco.'

The letter was dated from Monte

Carlo, and the French bank-note was for twenty thousand francs.

Beldia sat still with them both on the table before her, the sunshine falling on the paper-money. Here was deliverance; here was relief; here was succour.

The motes of the sunbeams swam and circled before her sight; there was a dull noise in her ears; she was strangely moved to relief, and yet to terror.

A gambler's money! — would her father take it?

She did not hear his voice calling to her until he had called thrice. She rose and went to him, the letter and money crumpled in her hand.

Ser Checchi stood at the head of the stair.

'You have had a letter; is it from Odisio?' he cried to her; for the Lombard, with his pure scholarship and his loyal manhood, was dear to him.

Beldia stood before him with a strange sense of guiltiness upon her; as if she had come out of some shameful place; and yet of gladness too, seeing the means by which all their mourning might be changed to rejoicing, and their woes undone.

Without daring to say one word in either joy or fear, she held out the letter to him. He glanced sharply at the money in her hand, a flush of hope and warmth passing over his wasted features.

Then he read Cirillo's writing once, twice, thrice, very slowly, as if he could not fathom its meaning, or believe his

own senses. He stretched out his hand and took the bank-note from her and folded it up with the letter; his face had grown cold and stern, as though it were cut in stone. Looking on him, she had no need to ask him if he accepted the gift.

'Give me an envelope and sealing-wax,' he said harshly.

She went to her chamber and brought both. He put the letter and the money together in the envelope, and sealed it with his big seal, and addressed it to his son's name at the post-office of Monaco.

'Send it to be registered,' he said sternly. 'If there be not a franc in the house to pay the postage, pawn my shirt.'

Beldia grew very pale.

'Father, he means well,' she said timidly. 'He has never seen as we see. He will only lose it at play if it go back to him; and — it would save all, it would save the books!'

The sunken blue eyes of Ser Checchi flashed their lightnings of terrible wrath upon her. For one moment she thought that he would strike her.

'Take the alms of my son! The spawn of a gambling hell! Dare you tempt me?—you? Let the books go; let the last stick and thread and crust which belonged to me go, but do not play the devil's part for him, and try to buy my soul with a gambler's gold!'

She dared not argue more; and the

letter went back to Cirillo by that evening's post, sealed with the big onyx seal of his father, with which he had played when he was a little curly-haired child, and stood at Ser Checchi's knee on Sunday afternoons at Antella.

Beldia knew that her father was right, that he was only true to himself in this act of inexorable honour. Yet, woman-like, she mourned for Cirillo, in whose hard heart she knew that there must have been a soft place, when he had penned that letter and parted with that large sum; she knew that there must have been in him some awakening to conscience, some regret for his faults and follies, some yearning for his kindred and his birthplace.

She wished that it had been returned to him less harshly. She wrote herself, and strove to soften the rejection of his aid, but to her letter she received no answer, neither then nor at any other time.

She never doubted that her father had done rightly, or that his choice was the only one possible to a man reared in the strong and pure ethics of the great writers whom he loved. But that rescue had been so near, succour so close, seemed to make their fate more cruel. It would have been a delight so exquisite, a pleasure so honest and so just, to have barred the door against the invasion of the law and had their home once more intact and inviolate. To put

down this sweetness untasted, to thrust away this healing draught untouched, made their torture only harder to endure.

CHAPTER XXII.

The days wore on, each one sadder, harder than the previous day; the men of the tribunal came, fussing and fuming, peeping into and roaming in and out of every room, and Beppe Dessi swelled with more insolence and more importance as the period of probation allowed by the law drew nearer and nearer to its end.

The bare walls with a few of the necessaries of daily life were soon to be all which would be left to them, and

soon even those walls were to shelter them no more; they would be driven out to a new home.

Unknown to them, Don Gervasio had taken a few humble chambers near his own dwelling, so that they should not find themselves utterly houseless; but he dared not speak of this even to Beldia; the thought that she could live elsewhere than in the tower seemed to paralyze all her energies and stupefy her intelligence.

'Oh, never elsewhere!—never elsewhere!' she said piteously to the old priest. 'We have done no harm that we should be forced away like slaves to be sold in a market, and the money for the rent is there.'

But the money for the rent was not

there; since Gigi Fanno, warned by Saetta's barber, had obtained an order from the tribunal for Don Gervasio to deliver it up in the name of the creditors which the priest had been forced to obey. But he had not the courage to tell her this; he knew that she would learn it soon enough; he knew that, were it still in his possession, it would be powerless to move their landlord to mercy; he knew that Maso Saetta would send them out by main force if they did not go voluntarily; and, therefore, unknown to her, he hired the little chambers looking on a shady monastery garden near Porta Romana, so that when the inevitable eviction should take place, there should be some shelter ready for her and for her father.

As though the terrible force of the temptation which had assailed him when he had refused his son's gift had broken down his moral and physical strength, Ser Checchi from that hour grew feebler and sicklier, and less able to meet the woes which pressed on him. As though the contrast of what was with what might have been, had he stooped to retain his son's gift, made the bitterness of his lot too much even for his fortitude, he passed whole days shut up in his bed-chamber, lost in apathetic meditation, and at times his eyes would fill with sudden tears, which he did not strive to conceal; something of the pathetic weakness of an innocent animal, harassed and tortured without resistance, had come into him. It seemed as if his

last forces had spent themselves in the rejection of Cirillo's gold.

Once she heard him mutter to himself:

'Even her pearls—even her mother's pearls—gone in a foreign hell!'

He did not view his son's action as she saw it; it only seemed to him an insult, an outrage, a degradation the more.

On one of these weary, empty, yet laborious, days in early autumn, when the city is at its dreariest, and dustiest, and dullest, Beldia, looking from a back casement which opened from the kitchen on the river, saw a boat come up and station itself under the tower wall, whilst the men who were in it fastened a rope's end to one of the iron stanchions

in the basement. She watched them unconsciously for a little time; her mind was dulled as by an opiate by the continued succession of sorrows, anxieties, humiliations, and miseries; as far as her thoughts were awake at all, they were dwelling in fancy on the vintage fields of Antella, with the white and dun oxen pacing through them, and the yellow dragon's mouth, and the lilac colchicum growing in the grassy furrows. It was the first autumn in all her life that she had not been amidst those fields when grapes were ripening in late summer suns. But, lost as she was in pain and in remembrance, the movements of these men below ended by arresting her attention; they had a pot of white paint on the bench of their little shallow boat,

and with a big brush they were making a broad white line along the brown stones of the tower at as great a height as they could reach. The terror which was now always with her as to the loss of her old home, made her watch with puzzled fear this singular marking of the ancient place.

'Good people, what are you doing there?' she asked them, leaning as far out of the window as she could.

They looked up, and the one who held the brush, standing at rest a moment, answered her civilly:

'We are marking the river-wall: where this line runs everything is to be pulled down. We have been below already, as you may see, signorina, if you look over yonder.'

'Pulled down!' she echoed the words stupidly.

'Ay, ay,' said the man. ''Tis a pity, I do think myself; there is a lot of life in these old stones still; but, you see, at Palazzo Vecchio they want to have everything spick-and-span new; they want to make a quay here, they say, with electric light, and a tramway, and new houses, all whitewashed, just like the quay on the other side, where the old Zeccha, and the trees, and the Alberti chapel used to be. And like enough, when all's been cleared, they'll choke it up with factories and gas works, just as the shore is choked up down yonder. But there! 'tis no business of mine, and the gentlemen want to turn some money—what else do they get

themselves made town-councillors for? Why, madamigella, how queer you look! Have you not heard of it before?'

And the good man, confused and troubled at the effect of his news, splashed his big brush into the iron pot again, and went on drawing his broad white line along the stones welded together so firmly by the artisans of Taddeo Gaddi.

Beldia sank down on the window-seat of the kitchen, and hid her face in her hands, as one who hears a death-warrant.

She did not doubt the workman's story. She remembered what Maso Saetta had said, and she knew the frightful apathy of the city before its own undoing, wrought for the greed

and gratification of its Jacks in office.

Destroyed! the tower destroyed! The blood surged in her ears and the tearless sobs strangled her breath like knotted cords.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Meantime of Odisio Fontana there had entirely ceased to come any tidings whatever, since the day that the ship in which he had sailed had touched at the island of Madeira. Gathering courage from her desperate dread, Beldia had written to his old master in Milan, and he to her had replied, formally, as to a stranger, that he also knew and had heard nothing, and shared her fears as to the fate of the vessel, of which no tidings had been rumoured by the underwriters.

He told her that the poor mother of Odisio had been spared the sorrow, for she had died, suddenly and painlessly, in her sleep, in the summer heats, and her small income had died with her. The Milan architect added that he had taken charge of the few things which she had left, and had placed them in safety to await communication of the wishes of her son.

Although Beldia had never had directly any word from her, she had heard so much from Odisio of his mother that she felt a personal pain and loss, when she learned that she would never see in life this gentle and learned northern woman, who had chosen to give her son rather the riches of the mind than the goods of the world, the

freedom of the spirit rather than the servitude of wealth.

It was a minor sorrow, lost in the deeper grief of her father's woes, and her own ignorance whether the man she loved were living or dead; but it was the one drop which filled her cup to overflowing.

She had not known how much solace and support she had unconsciously derived from the thought of Odisio's mother, until now that she learned her death.

Nor either of Cirillo did she know aught. From the night when he had vanished down the dusky street with her pearls upon him, he had given no sign of life. She supposed that he had got safely out of the country, since, had

he been arrested, it would have been publicly known. But his fate was hidden in obscurity.

Her father never named him. From time to time he roused himself from his depression and apathy to question her of her betrothed; but of his son he said never a word.

'Your mistress's Lombard is lost at sea, they tell me, good Nica,' said Beppe Dessi to Veronica one afternoon, when, as his wont was, he swaggered through the rooms, prying here and there, locking and unlocking, peering and fingering, jabbering and grinning. In that curious way in which bad news travels swiftly and cruelly, it had become known in the quarter that the Genoese vessel was reported missing.

'Were he dead on land, we would not ask you to pay for his burying,' said Veronica, who had come in, as she often did, to linger about her old kitchen, and try and coax her late mistress into eating some tit-bit which she brought with her; she had a coarse and shrewish tongue, but her heart was neither hard nor unfaithful.

'Ships be often silent for many a month, and come safe into port after all,' she added; 'anyhow, 'tis better to drown at sea than live to get fat on other folks' pain, and gnaw other folks' loaves, as you do, Beppino.'

Old Dessi chuckled, shaking his broad stomach.

'You have a vixen's tongue, but a witless one, my dear,' he replied.

'Few men are as merciful as I. Haven't I left your good people the use of their rooms and their things, when I might have locked them all up, and left nothing out but a mattress and a pipkin, and a knife and fork, as the law doth prescribe?'

He was seated as he spoke in Ser Checchi's own chair; he had his pipe in his mouth; with his fat, dirty fingers he was turning over a fair copy of the 'Bellezze di Firenze.' Not that he knew one book from another, or could tell a copper-plate engraving from a lithograph; but he liked to look important, and he could see the librarian in the inner chamber wince and move nervously, whenever a fine volume was roughly and rudely handled thus.

He had no personal ill-will to Ser Checchi, with whom he had never had any interviews until the executions levied on the books; but the low mind hates the higher spirit by instinct, and with ferocity, and gloats over its torment, as the grinning yokel loves to see the stately and gracious stag pulled down by hounds in a muddy lane.

Veronica, who was no respecter of persons, and whose temper was quickly roused, snatched the volume of Cinelli from him with no gentle hand, and banged it upon his shoulders.

'You porpoise!' she screamed, 'would you ape a scholar?' Look at the black marks your paw has left on the margins! Custodian you may be, and a

fine farce it is, if you be so; but you have no right to damage the goods you have charge of with that soot you have got on your fist from the grasp of your godfather the devil.'

Beppe Dessi laughed, because he always laughed at everything; but he was angry too; had Veronica not been a big, buxom, brown widow, much to his liking, he would have made her feel his anger as a representative of the sanctity of law.

'Jest away, sauce-box,' he said jocosely, chucking her under the chin. 'You won't laugh when you see the books go to sale on the carts on Friday, and all the pots and pans you used to use here swinging and jingling atop of them.'

Veronica turned gray under the

healthy brown and red of her complexion.

'Friday? 'Tis not as near as that; the saints help us!'

'Ay, that it is!' said Dessi, smacking his lips as over some savoury morsel. 'To-morrow I shall put up *bande*, and, you know, five days after, out everything goes, if the King's liege himself was the debtor.'

'The *bande!*' echoed Veronica, as in old days in that old tower women might have said with bloodless lips 'The plague!' or 'The headsman!'

When the *bande*—the declarations of the date of sale—are pasted on the walls and hung up by a string to the door of the doomed dwelling, nothing can arrest the sale of the debtor's possessions. It

is the funeral knell over the burial of credit and of honour.

Bribes, prayers, tempted cupidity, hope of other modes of payment, may retard the bringing of the *bande*, but once brought, nothing except payment can avert the sale which they announce.

'Not the *bande!*' shrieked Veronica. 'Not yet, not yet! Oh, Beppino—dear, good, kind Beppino—you will put off the day, you will persuade the people, you will not bring these horrible, thrice accursed *bande* here?'

Dessi's fat sides shook with contented facetiousness.

'Ay, ay, ay! It is "dear Beppino"—"good, kind Beppino" now, is it? Is the devil my godfather now?'

'The devil is your godfather, and

your father too, if you bring those vile things here. You know well enough when those papers are out there is nothing to be done—no hope, no help, no anything. Look ye, Beppe, you never dare——'

'Dare!' said the great man, swelling bigger and bigger with his own importance. 'Dare! That is a fine word to use to me! If you don't take care to keep a civiller tongue behind your teeth I will clap you in prison for maltreatment of a peaceable citizen in the orderly pursuit of the duties which the law entails on him. My shoulders ache now with your banging of that big book; and were you not a passable, good-looking wench for your years——'

'What are my looks, bad or good, to

you? I am not come to such a pass that I need take a gouty old bailiff for my lover!' screamed Veronica, hissing in her rage like the hot water in her own boiling coppers. 'You are a monster, Beppe!—a beast, a pig, a raging tiger! What! bring the salesmen here to my honoured master, to my dear and saint-like mistress! You never can, you never shall. I will tear the coat off your back, and your hair off your head in the street with my hands and my teeth——'

'These folks are not your master or your mistress any more, so you need not fuss about them; and it is not I who force the sales; it is the creditors,' said Beppe Dessi sullenly, for his dignity was hurt by her invectives. 'And

neither Gigi nor I have aught to do with hurrying on or holding off the sales, as you would know without being told, if you weren't an ignorant vixen; and I know not what good could be got out of waiting any longer, if we could wait, for these people have not a farthing left, and every day the costs run on, and so every day which is wasted is a theft to the creditors, and to me myself, as one may say. For, as it is, there will be precious little to divide between us when all this lumber of musty books is sold.'

Veronica's nerves gave way; she fetched him a sounding box on the ear, then threw her apron over her head, as her habit was under emotion, and sobbed aloud.

The *bande !*—how often in that poor quarter of the town were these words heard like a tocsin tolling in ruin and death !

The sound of the blow and the cries roused Ser Checchi where he was seated in the little dining-room, whither he had gone to avoid seeing the profanation and pollution of his volumes by the hands of the bailiff.

He rose and approached them.

'Woman, what do you here ? You are no more in any service of mine,' he said to her. 'Yes, I know you mean well; but you have no place here now, and I cannot have this brawling in my chamber.'

'Ser Checchi ! Ser Checchi !' sobbed Veronica, 'the old beast swears that he

will put up the papers to sell on Friday. Who ever heard the like? The papers once up, what can you do? There will be only five days to find help, and you will not find it; everything will go, from your books which have ruined you, to the stewpans and pipkins that I used fifteen long years in this house come Barnabas' Day!'

Ser Checchi wavered slightly, like a man who has been struck a heavy blow. But he steadied himself, feeling the eyes of Beppe Dessi staring with curiosity and triumph upon him.

'Is it true?' he asked the man briefly.

'Ay, ay, sir; it is true,' said Dessi, for once serious, and forced into respect, he knew not why.

'And—you sell—everything?'

'Everything, sir,' replied the bailiff; and he added with his audacious fat chuckle: 'I suppose you think much of them, but they'll make a mighty poor show in the auction-room.'

Ser Checchi made one passionate movement, as though he would have struck the blasphemer to the ground; then, with a violent effort controlling his impulse, he left the room in silence. He felt as one who hears his children insulted, his friends dishonoured in his presence, and is powerless to avenge them.

All those dear companions of his studies! All those precious assistants of his labours! All those valued ministers to his meditations! The Seneca, the Pindar, the Cicero, the St. Augustine,

the Tertullian, the Villani, the Vitruvius, the Aldine Horace, the Etienne Plato, the Giuntini Avicenna, the Labacco, the Cicoonara, the Pistolesi, the scores and scores of familiar and beloved brethren of his heart and mind, which were now for ever to pass from their honoured rest within his walls, and be flung into unworthy hands, perchance be torn and tossed piecemeal to some shameful fate! And it was his own fault, his own clumsy, stupid, foolish fault, his own ignorance, carelessness, and witlessness, which had brought him to this pass, and made him powerless to protect himself or them!

CHAPTER XXIV.

Don Gervasio did his best to help his old friend, but he was a poor priest with no money but that which he held in trust for others; and though he stooped to use expostulation and supplication in Ser Checchi's cause, which he would never have used in his own, he could effect little, except to obtain some slight delay in the execution of the sentences.

Ser Checchi deserved no enemies, but he had few friends; men who are at

once shy and proud do not easily make friends, and his absorption in his intellectual and interior life had seemed like arrogance and stiffness to the other tradesmen of the neighbourhood. The few who valued and cared for him, like the old churchmen and professors who frequented his rooms, and were of like tastes with himself, were poor indeed in worldly goods, and, even were they willing to aid him, were without any means to do so. The simplicity and solitude of his life had been such as to isolate him from all practical men of affairs, except, indeed, from Vestuccio. But Vestuccio, though his name did not figure on these fatal documents, was the instigator and director of all their misfortunes. That Beldia felt; even her

father confessed it; the appropriation of Antella proved it.

'If Aurelio Vestuccio had kept faith with me, no ill would have ensued,' said her father, and she forbore to press him for details; she had not lived amongst tradesfolk all her life without knowing the misery and ruin which come of protested bills, of overdrawn accounts, of unpaid interest, of worthless paper. Their lives had indeed been detached almost completely from that of their neighbours, yet still she had always been acquainted with these things which she witnessed daily, weighing on the mind, and eating away the savings of the small people of her quarter. She was conversant enough with the aspects of commercial failure

to understand that her father had no chance of rising above his bankruptcy.

He had no credit.

He was an honest man; indeed, he had never had wit enough to be otherwise, said the wags of the neighbourhood; but he had no commercial credit; everyone knew him to be a dreamer and a scholar, to whom nobody in their senses would have dared to lend a five-franc piece. At least, not now that the deeds of sale had been hung above his door.

If it be a golden rule to kick a man when he is down, it is none the less so never to lend a penny to anyone who wants it.

Had the lands of Antella been in the case, things would have gone differently;

both bankers and lawyers love a property which is immovable. But Antella, from its topmost branch to its lowest ditch, from the tiles on its roofs to the cress in its runlets of water, was wholly and absolutely given over to Vestuccio. His claims were paramount; he was its mortgagee; his name appeared on the deeds of mortgage openly, and on the surface of things he seemed to have conducted himself with as much forbearance and benevolence as were possible to a cautious man of business, who was bound to consider prudence and self-interest. Everyone who spoke of this matter on piazza, and in studio and office, said with one voice that Messer Aurelio had behaved excellently well, and if he had at the last entered into his own, it

was only just that he should do so; and everyone applauded his past moderation.

If many in the town knew or guessed that the other lenders were but his allies and instruments, if it were generally understood that his master-hand loosened or tightened the meshes of the web in which the weakness of Ser Checchi had been drawn, no one failed to respect him the more for that. It is thus that fortunes are made in these days, when everyone is content to measure the golden fruits, and no one asks or cares what filthy rags or foul excrements may have manured the roots of the tree which bore them. Besides, no one cared about Ser Checchi at all, except a few bookworms, archæologists, and antiquarians

like himself, who were as poor as they were learned. Everyone cared about Aurelio Vestuccio—a rising man, a promising citizen—in whose success many other interests were involved, from those of the bankers and private gentlemen who found it lucrative to be behind him in his larger mortgages and loans, to the little tradesfolk who saw in his success the triumph of their own class, and never found him reluctant to lend them a hundred francs in their hard moments.

The actual day of sale soon arrived, as Beppe Dessi had declared that it would do, seeming so sudden in its crash of doom, although such cruel torment had preceded and foreshadowed it.

All the neighbourhood was aware of the date, for the printed announcements swinging under the doorway-shield, and at the public tribunal, had made it public, and all the men and women in the street got up betimes to lose no portion of the tragedy, which was a comedy to them.

As soon almost as the sun arose, the men of law gathered at the great door of the tower, and, leaving carts and hand-barrows waiting for their loads on the stones below, climbed the stairs in company with their hired men, stalwart, rough, brawny porters with hairy arms and sun-brown skins and coarse voices, who pushed, noisy and hot and turbulent, up the dusky staircase. The people who lived within sight of the tower were all

out of their own dwellings, and gathered in the street agog and gaping, the baker's wife foremost among them; and, in the house itself, the charcoal-seller, the chandler, the cobbler, the tailor, and the cabinet-maker craned their necks to watch, and doffed their caps to the minions of the law, with nervous smiles and eager salutations: 'Good-day, good gentlemen! We hope we see you well!'

The lookers-on crowded below amongst the sacks and cheese and charcoal, the lad Poldo amongst them; there was a great uproar of voices and a great pushing and struggling to see what would first be brought down the stairs; in the streets the mules harnessed to the carts were stamping, and shaking their

bells; the usual street cries were unheard, for the vendors had come in with the crowd, the fair morning sunshine poured its light on the loves and garlands and shields of Messer Luca; the men tramped on up the stairs, under the noble Latin inscription of the library door.

Beldia, shut in her own chamber, kneeling at prayer, heard the noise and confusion, and rose to her feet and listened breathlessly.

Even up to this very latest moment she had always thought that some miracle would happen, that the books would in some way be saved.

She hurried to her father's room. He was up and clothed; indeed, he had not lain down all the night.

'Oh, father,' she murmured with dry, white lips. 'Oh, father!—they are come!'

'I hear them, my love,' he answered gently. He was quite still, save only for the nervous trembling and twitching of his hands.

She put her arms about his throat, and pressed her head against his breast.

He stroked her hair tenderly.

'Good child, good child,' he said in a low and dreamy voice. 'You have never rebuked me.'

Then he put her with gentleness away from him, and went out across the passage and into the book-room, and sat down in his great leathern chair.

'You cannot bear to see them taken away, father,' murmured Beldia. 'Come

elsewhere; come into my room, they will not dare disturb you there.'

He waved her aside.

'They shall find me in my place,' he answered. 'I am a feeble and foolish spendthrift, but I am not a coward.'

And he waited, seated in his big black leather chair, where so often he had sat to follow and enjoy the abstruse learning of his cherished studies, and trace the handwriting of penmen dead seven centuries and more.

'Keep your chamber, my dear,' he said to her. 'I would not have their cruel eyes fall on you in your sorrow.'

'But let me stay with you, father. Pray let me stay! I will be calm and silent; I can control what I feel. You may trust me.'

'I never distrust you. But I will not have you seen by those coarse men. Shut yourself in your chamber; let me not be disobeyed by *you*.'

The neighbours meanwhile were all staring out of their doors, eager to see with their cruel relish for the misfortunes of others, which is not confined to the courtly world which Rochefoucauld knew. Only the cobbler, he who had used to take care of the plants and the pigeons, had tears in his eyes, and cried aloud: 'Alack the day! who would ever have believed to see the like of this after all these years of honoured solvency!'

Whereupon Beppe Dessi cuffed him on the ear, half in joke, half in anger.

'You fool!' said the bailiff; 'any-

body with the eye of a fish might have seen what was coming ten years ago. A tradesman cannot buy books like a Pope and all his Cardinals without going bankrupt.'

'Alack, alack, so good a soul to come to such a pass!' cried the cobbler, the big tears coursing down his nose.

'What good doth goodness?' said Beppe Dessi. ''Tis but a poor soft thing which gets hunted like a hare.'

And they went on up the stairs with Gigi Fanno and the porters, and the young clerk with the pen behind his ear, and all their followers, trooping noisily, chattering and halloaing in their wake; but they stopped on the threshold of the door, surprised and

taken aback to see the old librarian in his accustomed place.

'The impudent old idiot!' muttered Beppe Dessi, and his coadjutor, blustering, yet in his secret soul afraid, advanced to the table at which Ser Checchi sat, and producing the acts and authorities of sale, recited the usual formulas in a pompous, unintelligible gabble, concluding with the usual interrogation:

'You are unprepared to pay these just demands—capital, interest, and costs?'

'I cannot pay,' replied Ser Checchi coldly.

There was a coarse laugh, led by Dessi and echoed by the other men, which Gigi Fanno silenced with a gesture.

'You had best, then, not molest or hinder the proceedings of the law,' he said pompously. 'We have come to remove the goods which are forfeited by sentence and order of the civil and correctional tribunal of this city.'

'Obey your orders,' replied Ser Checchi. His hands had ceased to tremble; they were clasped before him upon his desk. His face was colourless but calm. Something in his tone awed and hushed the boisterous and offensive humour of the men. Beppe Dessi alone, chuckling and thrusting out his paunch, said, with a tap of his pipe-bowl on the cover of a quarto Tertullian: 'They've cost you dear, your ugly old books, but they'll only sell for waste-paper, I warrant me. If I'd wished to ruin my-

self, I'd have done it better than that—good wines now, or good dishes, or plump women——'

'Enough chatter, Beppe,' said his colleague, putting up his papers in his pocket. 'Get to work. The rooms must be cleared by eight. The sale is at ten o'clock. Quick!'

He made a sign of impatience to his followers, and the men threw themselves on the first bundles of volumes which were near them. Already corded together, pell-mell, with no reference to their dates, or values, or titles, the books, which had taken fifty years of assiduous toil and patient devotion to collect, they were rapidly divided, seized, hoisted on the rough men's shoulders, and carried down the stairs, to be thrown into the

carts waiting for them as though they were bales of straw or sacks of beans. Warming to their work of devastation, as soldiers to the sacking of a town, they cleared away parcel after parcel with an alacrity wholly contrary to their usual lazy, dawdling, sleepy ways, and the folios and manuscripts, which had been as neighbours and brethren on the same shelves so long, were torn from one another, and borne out of that tranquil atmosphere of learning and of peace down into the brawling and dirt of the narrow pavement below, and flung, even as the Pisan captives, bound hand and foot, had once been carried through these very streets, on the planks and straw of the barrows and waggons.

The shelves had long been empty.

Now the floors were cleared. Ser Checchi sat motionless at the table: not a word or a gesture escaped him.

The vulgar souls of the men were frightened by that calm and dignified attitude; the carters instinctively moved a little more quietly, carried their burdens away a little more carefully. Only Beppe Dessi, going to and fro shouting his orders, swearing his oaths, grinning, laughing, calling out now a blasphemy, and now a joke, came up to him and struck him familiarly on the shoulder: 'Hi! old book-worm, get up! Your chair goes too, you know. We've left you a stool in the kitchen. Get up, I say!'

Ser Checchi rose slowly, and turned and faced him. The tough hide of the

bailiff winced under his regard. The porters made a muttering sound of rebuke and protest. Gigi Fanno whispered in his colleague's ear: 'Softly, softly! the chair can wait for to-morrow's sale.'

But the old man laid his hands upon it, as if in blessing; it was an old friend, and had been in his house two centuries and more; then he pushed it towards them in silence, and went to the embrasure of the kneeling-window and seated himself on its stone step.

'Tis a shame—a crying shame—to take even his chair from under him!' muttered one of the porters; but Beppe Dessi struck the grumbler a sharp blow with his stick.

'You are a beast of burden, not a

counsellor, Tonino,' he said to the man; 'when we ask your opinion you can give it; speak again, and you shall go before the Questura for contumacy. Take out the old fool's chair.'

The poor fellow, grumbling inaudibly, hoisted, with effort, the large leathern seat upon his shoulders, and, staggering under its weight, carried it through the doorway and set it down with a crash upon the stone landing at the head of the stairs.

Then they bore away the table, with its desk, the volumes which had been upon it, the large old brass inkstand and the bronze cup for sand, and the other chairs which stood about the chamber, and the cypress wood shelves and fittings of the bookcases.

Ser Checchi looked on in silence, seated on the embrasure of the high-barred window, the light of earliest morning shining on his brow and eyes.

'The old man is stronger than I thought,' muttered Gigi Fanno to Dessi. They were chagrined; they had hoped for some scene of resistance and violence, or at least for one of tears and of supplication.

This calm and dignified silence baffled their malignity and gave their coarse natures no pleasure.

The tramping tread of the carters up and down the stairs, the loud angry voices in dispute, the dust which rose in gray clouds, the noise, and haste, and clumsy bustle, continued for a time, then ceased; to be succeeded by the grinding

of the wheels on the stones below, and the oaths of the men to their mules and their stable-boys. Then all was still beneath; the little curious, indolent crowd of spectators had moved away after the carts and barrows. Ser Checchi was left alone in the empty rooms, filled with the choking smell of dust, and sweat, and unwashed human flesh.

He tried to rise, but his limbs failed him, he could not get up from the stone seat; he ceased to try to move, and waited, knowing that his daughter would soon come to him.

'May I come in, master?' asked the harsh voice of the woman servant Veronica, as her broad, brightly-coloured figure stood in the doorway. Her voice was gentle now, and broken with

sobbing; her face was swollen with tears.

'Forgive me, master! Oh, forgive me!' she said with a loud cry, as she fell on her knees. 'Never did I think to see a martyrdom like this. I will serve you night and day on no wage, if you will let me. I have never had a moment's peace since I left you and the damagella.'

He seemed not to hear, or not to understand. His mind was not with her; it was with his lost books.

'Get me my hat and stick,' he said hoarsely. 'Quick! go, get them, I say.'

'What would you do, master?' she asked, terrified at something in his look and voice.

'What is that to you? Go, get my hat and stick, I say.'

Trembling, Veronica went and got them, and brought them to him.

'Help me up,' he said irritably, with the first irritation he had shown. She put her strong arms under his, and raised him up. He stood a moment, but his limbs failed him; he knew they would answer to his will no longer.

'Call my daughter,' he said, again sinking heavily on to the stone seat. 'Say nothing to her of me, mind you, nothing; only tell her that the men are gone, that she may come to me. Do what I tell you, and do no more.'

Frightened, the woman hastened from the room.

In another moment Beldia came, fol-

lowed by Folko, growling as he lingered over and smelt the traces of the many steps.

Her father motioned her back as she would have come to him.

'Go to the sales-room in the piazza of San Firenze,' he said imperatively. 'Cover yourself so that none recognise you, and stay there until my Dante Codex be bid for, then return and tell me to whom it is allotted.'

'But you are ill, father! Do not send me from you, for pity's sake!'

'I am not ill. Go, as I bid you, and stay the whole day if needful, until you learn that which I tell you.'

Beldia obeyed without more protest.

'Keep Folko in,' she said to Veronica;

'and if you have indeed any love for us, stay with my father till I return.'

'That will I, never fear,' replied Veronica.

The woman was sobbing noisily, with a loud but sincere sorrow. She could not understand their tearless eyes, their calm, low voices, their self-control under their torture.

The morning wore away; Veronica prepared some food for the dog and gave it to him, made some coffee for her late master, which he did not touch, brought a pillow to place behind his shoulders, and put to the wooden shutter to keep out the sun.

Then there was nothing more for her to do; she took out her straw plaiting and sat down at the head of the stairs,

whence she could see Ser Checchi without annoying him by her presence. The hours wore away, she counted them by the tolling of Santo Spirito; the old Dutch clock in its tall lacquered case, which had sounded the hours for so many years in those rooms, had been taken away to the auction-rooms.

'To be sold for a song, I dare say,' she thought; she knew well how sales are controlled and conducted; that long ere the auctioneer's signal had sounded, the cabal of professional buyers have agreed amongst themselves what to run up and what to run down, and how to play into each other's hands, so that, go the sale how it may, they alone will be gainers by it.

The day wore away and seemed as

though it would never end. Ser Checchi did not move, his head leaned against the pillow which she had placed for him, and its linen was not whiter than his features; she took him a little red wine, he put his lips to it, but could not drink. Every moment was torture to him; every moment something which had been his was passing away into the hands of strangers, never to return.

When Beldia's step was heard on the stairs his pale cheeks flushed, the nervous trembling in his hand returned, his eyes had a pitiful longing in them.

'The Dante?' he muttered faintly, as she entered the room. She was clothed in black, and had a black shawl drawn over her head like a hood. Great slow tears were now rolling down her cheeks.

'The Dante?' he said, more loudly, as he raised himself on his elbows and gazed at her.

She answered him unwillingly, but in obedience and truth.

'It went with other old books in a lot for forty francs; there was no competition; Vestuccio's clerk bought it.'

'As I thought!' he murmured. 'As I thought!'

Beldia fell at his feet.

'Oh, my father, my dear father!—what a wretch I am to tell it you, but you would have it so!—alas, alas! of what use is one's love for you, if it cannot save you from these miseries?'

'This wretchedness is none of your fault,' he answered feebly, while his

hand touched her hair. 'And it is always well to be loved and obeyed.'

Half an hour passed by in silence; and they watched there, afraid to move, afraid to disturb him; the sun fell through a chink across his eyes, and he looked up at it vaguely with failing sight.

Then he was silent, his head bent, his eyes closed.

The two women watched him in awe and fear; the white dog crept up to his feet.

Veronica thought he was cold, and opened the shutter to let in the flood of early evening light.

'The sun can give me no warmth,' he said faintly. 'The cold is coming upward – soon it will reach my heart—

so far it is well; I shall not leave the tower! But you—you—all alone—ah, Beldia!'

It was the last word he ever spoke. By the fall of night he was dead.

CHAPTER XXV.

They buried him at Trespignano, the graveyard of the poor; and at the same hour as that of his burial, Aurelio Vestuccio, seated at his desk in his little office, wrote out a receipt for two thousand pounds of English money; the price paid for the Codice of the 'Divina Commedia' by an English bibliophile, who was more learned in black-letter than in commerce, and who was ignorant that the volume had been

bought at a public sale only a few days earlier for as many pence.

The bibliophile was sworn to secrecy in the matter of this purchase on account of the law which forbids the sale of antique and precious things to foreigners. In the city of Dante no one ever knew or heard what had become of the folio.

Once the smith of Giogoli, making troublesome questions of him in the Piazza della Signoria, Ser Aurelio said to him, shaking his head: 'Ah! my good friend, I shall never see back those five hundred francs which I gave you for that rusty volume which our poor old blind bookseller so stupidly thought such a treasure. I bought it in at his sale, as you know; but I had to give it

away for ten francs. I was poor old Ser Checchi's dupe always! Well, well! we will say no harm of the dead.'

CHAPTER XXVI.

A YEAR and six months passed away; the winds of spring once more were on the air, the showers of spring once more were on the soil, and everywhere, in the duskiest shadows of the house walls and palace parapets, the flowers of spring were lying in dewy sheaves and moss-lined baskets all over the city.

It was a brilliant forenoon in the month of March, the river, brimming and green, rolled rapidly beneath its bridges to its fall over the weir; the

sky was of purest azure, flecked with little, light, snowy clouds; the bronze Bacchus of San Jacopo had blossoming boughs of pear and peach leaning up against his stone water-trough, and bunches of Narcissus poeticus were heaped in rush-skips underneath the stern walls of the old Manelli tower. Baskets full of early primroses were carried down the narrow ways, and the field daffodils blazed in their deeper gold, tied up by their own blade-like leaves, and brought to die of drought and dust, far from their pleasant nests at the foot of olive-trees or maples in the grassy paths of the hillside farms. The bells above-head were chiming in melodious riot, and the sparkling sunshine shone through the open portals of

churches, and on the gray wings of pigeons on the house-roofs, on the silver dishes and jewelled trinkets of the goldsmiths' stalls, and on the yellow head and white shirt of a little chorister walking and ringing his bell before the Host.

A man went quickly past the jewellers' and goldsmiths' shops upon the bridge built by Taddeo Gaddi, and the flower and fruit stalls under the Bacchus.

He moved with a light step, as of one who was happy and eager; his face was sunburnt, and his clothes were worn; his bright clear eyes glanced from the old walls to the blue sky, from the primrose and daffodil baskets to the iron stanchions and the stone machi-

colations, seeing in one and all dear and familiar friends. He went on his way rapidly, until a few paces farther onward the shadow of the Tower of Taddeo fell across the narrow causeway which it dominated. Whilst he was still some yards away from its lofty walls, he stared at them, doubting his own sight; all its ornament, its shields, its garlands, its amorini, and its angels, in their canopied niches, all were gone; its balconies and its gratings were gone also; its windows were blank and dark, like eyes which are wide open but sightless, and in the arch where its Madonna had sat throned, there was a mere vacant, gaping aperture.

He stood upon the opposite side of the way, and gazed at its desecrated

walls in stupefaction; a woman, in a baker's shop which fronted it, came out and looked at him, and said to herself, with her hands resting on her hips:

'Holy Jesus save us! If it be not the Lombard come back, who they said was drowned!'

He at whom she stared had already crossed the street and was knocking violently with the heavy bronze knocker on the great oaken nail-studded door, which used to stand open all the day long, with the mastiff, Lillo, as the guardian at its threshold. The loud knocking resounded through the street, echoed by the high walls around. But there was no response to it other than its own echo. The tower was mute as a grave.

Amazed and terrified, he turned to the baker's wife, who stood in her doorway, and recognised her.

'What has happened? Where are they? What has been done here? Why is it silent and ruined thus?'

The woman, nothing loath to be a bearer of ill-tidings, crossed the road and stood beside him.

'Why, man, you look as white as a ghost under your brown skin! I thought you were a ghost. They said you were lost at sea in some outlandish parts. Eh! it's no use your staring at the tower; there is no one in it; Ser Checchi is dead, and the place is empty. The municipality have bought it, and are going to pull it down. They pull down everything they can, you know;

the old stones are gilt gingerbread to them.'

'Dead! dead! Ser Checchi?'

He echoed the words in horror, and staggered and leaned against the doorway, with a sick sense of faintness upon him.

'Beldia?' he said hoarsely.

'She is alive; she lives hard by,' answered the baker's wife. 'She has not a bronze halfpenny, and she works for her bread. Lord! how odd you look! Did you never hear that the old tower was sold up before he died? Ay, he lost everything; and they do say that what killed him was the sale of his old musty books. Anyhow, he died on the very day of the sale: he had been ailing some time. Some say Vestuccio, the

dealer, was at the bottom of all. 'Tis he bought those garlands and loves of Luca's off the wall yonder, and chipped them out of their niches, and took them away. He has sold them to some foreign museum. There was talk of the authorities stopping him, but he squared them, and made a fine picking. He bought the old iron, too. Holy Mary! how ill and scared you look! Come across to my shop and take a drink of wine. It will put heart into you.'

He thanked her, but refused her by a gesture; his features were contracted and his chest heaved with tearless sobs.

'Ser Checchi! my dear, innocent, generous Ser Checchi!' he murmured,

'shall I never see his face, hear his voice? Oh, my God! what he must have suffered before he died! And she!'

'You think of her still, then? Where have you been all this while? Some said you were drowned. Most thought you only kept away to get rid of her, and keep out of her father's troubles.'

'The ship went down in mid-ocean,' he answered briefly. 'I saved myself by swimming. I have been on a desert island, and was only rescued a few weeks ago by a barque which was bound for Valparaiso. I did not write, because I have travelled as fast as any post could come. All that matters nothing now. Tell me of her; where can I find her?'

'In the Canto dei Santi over yonder. Number eighty, fourth floor. But she looks old and ill. She is not worth a thought from a comely gallant like you. Why should you go after her? Come in and have a drink of something, and tell me all about your wreck and the strange things on land and water which you have seen.'

For this Calypso, with her buxom shape, her bold amorous eyes, and her curling red-brown locks, thought that she could easily console this stranded Odysseus.

But he put her roughly away, as she laid her hand upon his arm, and with a backward look of longing at the old tower in its mutilated strength, he went on to find the place which she had

named: a narrow passage-way connecting two side streets behind the dome of the Carmine, shaded by the adjacent trees of a palace garden, and frequented by the pigeons circling around the cupola of Massaeio's church.

'Ser Checchi dead!' he murmured to himself as he went. 'Ser Checchi dead! and the books dispersed!—oh, vile beast that I was to leave them alone in their helplessness and their sorrow for sake of gain! Well have I merited to return poorer even than when I sailed!'

With a beating heart, torn between joy and grief, between hope and fear, he climbed the steep and uncleanly stair, foul with noxious odours and slippery from the continual tread of many feet.

He struck on the panel of the low wooden door which was shown to him as hers; the barking within of a dog, in which he recognised the voice of Folko, answered him.

'Who is there?' asked Beldia, as she withdrew the bolt of the door.

Then he feared to be too sudden for her, and to startle her too perilously as one risen from the grave; he hung back a moment, thinking how he could best prepare her for their meeting; but in that instant of time the white dog, thrusting his nose through the open chink of the door, pushed it further open and sprang on him in instantaneous joy of recognition; then Beldia saw him also.

She would have fallen on the stones

insensible, had he not caught her and raised her to his heart.

She was in truth so changed that he would scarce have known her. She had lost her bloom, her youth, the gloss on her fair hair, the light in her serene eyes; she had grown old before her time from sorrow and from solitude. Through winter and summer, autumn and spring, she had dwelt here alone with the dog; visited only by Don Gervasio and by Veronica, copying papers and sewing linen to buy her daily pittance of food; hearing all through these latter days, as they echoed to her ear over the roofs, the blows of the pickaxes and hammers which were routing out and beating down, under a cloud of dust, the beauty and the

strength of that beloved old home which was passing from its place in the city as her father had passed from his place amongst living men.

It had been a life of extreme misery, of incessant toil, of endless anxiety; oftentimes she had gone without bread herself that she might give some to the dog, and she had no supper but a glass of water; and the sole thought which had sustained the breath of life in her was her belief that her lost betrothed would still return to her.

'You never doubted me?' asked Odisio, an hour later.

She answered:

'Nay, love—had I doubted you, I should not have found strength to live till now.'

Colophon.

On the site of the Tower of Taddeo there is now standing the chimney of a factory, belching forth its stinking vapours to the sullied waters and the outraged heavens.

The change is called Progress.

THE END.

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